The Bean Eaters

SUMMARY

They usually eat beans, this worn-out old couple. For them, dinner is informal. They eat from simple, chipped dishes at a rickety table. Their knives and forks are made of cheap tin.

These two people, who have generally been upstanding citizens, have now lived out most of their lives. But they still get dressed and tidy their home, day after day.

All the while, they reminisce about the past—a process that brings them both joy and pain. As they remember, they hunch over their meal of beans in the secluded room they rent, which is full of old odds and ends.

THEMES

OLD AGE AND MEMORY

"The Bean Eaters" describes an elderly couple huddled over a familiar meal of beans. Having already "lived their day," the couple now faces a dull and repetitive existence, seemingly going through the motions of life—getting dressed, cleaning up—without any sense of purpose or excitement. All the while, their thoughts of the past bring them moments of both sparkling joy and pain. The poem thus speaks both to the lonely monotony of old age and to the simultaneous consolations and burdens of memory.

The speaker opens the poem with a picture of an elderly couple in decline, introducing these figures as an "old yellow pair." The couple's "yellow" appearance might suggest ill health and also recalls the fragility of old, weathered paper. Many years removed from the possibilities of their youth, the couple's lives have been reduced to a repetitive series of humdrum tasks and habits. The speaker says that "they eat beans mostly"—meaning that this plain, bland meal is their staple diet. Similarly, "they keep on" getting dressed and tidying their belongings. The speaker's repetition of words like "plain" calls attention to how simple and unexciting the couple's routines are.

But it wasn't always this way, the poem implies. In fact, going about their daily tasks reminds the couple of their more eventful past. The speaker describes them "remembering… / Remembering" while they eat, a process that brings the couple both joy and pain—"twinklings and twinges"—as they think about happier times long ago. Indeed, these are two people who have already experienced much of what life has to offer; they "have lived their day," the speaker says. The contrast of the past tense "lived" with the active, ongoing "remembering" emphasizes that the couple has passed their prime and is left only with their memories in the present.

The couple's routines remind them of this sad truth too. They "keep on putting […] away" ordinary items like "receipts" and "tobacco crumbs," these apparently useless fragments of the past (and the memories they conjure) filling the couple's home to bursting. All this clutter also seem to make more work for the pair, who come across as destined to repeat this cycle of eating beans, tidying, and feeling nostalgic until they die. Thus while the couple's memories offer them the emotional richness and fulfillment that their present lives lack, the speaker implies that these memories are also burdensome reminders of a lost past.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11

DISCRIMINATION AND NEGLECT

The elderly couple in "The Bean Eaters" is isolated not just because of their old age, but also because of their poverty—and, given the broader context of Brooks's work, likely because of their race. By calling attention to the couple's bleak living situation, the poem critiques the way society neglects and dehumanizes those who are financially struggling—*especially* when they are also part of a minority group.

The speaker makes it clear that the couple is experiencing poverty, and suggests that they experience discrimination as a result. For example, the speaker refers to their dinner as "a casual affair," using grandiose language (i.e., calling a meal an "affair") to exaggerate the couple's low social status, and inventing the term "chipware" as an elegant descriptor for cracked dishes. This tongue-in-cheek appropriation of upper-class terminology suggests the sharp contrast between the lives of the poor and the rich—who definitely aren't eating off "chipware." The couple is also physically isolated from the rest of society in their "rented back room," hidden away from the public.

In the poem's title, the speaker even equates the couple with the beans they eat for dinner. In the U.S., cheap beans are often considered a lower-class food, and the speaker invokes this stereotype to illustrate how society "others" or dehumanizes the couple. By referring to the couple as "that old yellow pair," the speaker also suggests how the world sees this couple through the lens of age and skin tone—again, dehumanizing them based on their distance from the dominant social class. "Yellow" has a long history as a racial slur in the U.S. as well, and the speaker calls upon this sort of derogatory language to suggest that social stigmas have resulted in the couple's

isolation and neglect.

The speaker grants the couple dignity and respect by calling them "Mostly Good." Yet after humanizing them (and securing readers' sympathy), the speaker notes that the pair are nevertheless confined to their boring, lonely routines, creating a sense of injustice. In other words, no matter how well these people lived their lives, they are destined to isolation, monotony, and anonymity. They don't even have names to mark them out as individuals. The couple at the heart of the poem—both human and anonymous—thus reveal the neglect and erasure that poverty, ageism, and racism inflict.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

They eat beans ...
... a casual affair.

"The Bean Eaters" opens with a description of a lonely couple, worn by age, eating their usual meal of beans. The watching third-person speaker calls this couple an "old yellow pair," an image that evokes oxidized paper or a tattered old pair of shoes. This couple seems to have weathered a lot together.

By calling the couple a "pair," the speaker signals that these two are very close. The members of a "pair" are made for one another, and each is incomplete without its other half. (Think of a *pair* of headphones or a *pair* of pants.) The couple's closeness suggests that they've shared a long and loving relationship. But perhaps that they've grown so closely together as they've aged that they've lost their separate identities.

The couple's meal—and the poem's title, "The Bean Eaters"—suggests that this "old yellow pair" doesn't have much money to spare. They're not just eating beans for dinner tonight, they eat them "mostly." This cheap, plentiful food will become the poem's central metaphor for the couple's poverty.

But while this couple isn't rich, the sounds in these first lines suggest that they're not too unhappy, either. Mellow, assonant long /oh/ and /ee/ sounds in "They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair" ease the audience into the scene; there's certainly something sad in this repeated meal of beans, but also something gentle. And the strong end-stops in these first two lines evoke the couple's unhurried pace. It's as if they're pausing to catch their breath as they move around their room, getting dinner ready.

There's also a touch of humor in the poem's second line: "Dinner is a casual affair." Readers might expect to see "Dinner is a casual affair" on an invitation to a cocktail hour, not as a description of an elderly couple eating beans at home. The speaker here appropriates upper-class language to ironically highlight the couple's poverty. The lighthearted mood of this line has an edge, creating a tension between an upper-class "casual affair" and the stark reality the couple faces.

LINES 3-4

Plain chipware on ...
... Tin flatware.

In the second half of the first stanza, the couple's home comes into focus as the speaker describes a "creaking" wooden table, cheap cutlery, and chipped dishes. Precise images of the couple's run-down belongings bring the setting to life.

The consonant /p/ and /t/ sounds make this scene even more vivid:

> Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
> Tin flatware.

Those /p/s and /t/s mimic the sound of "flatware" hitting "chipware"—and suggest the quiet of the room as the couple eat. Perhaps, after all their years together, they don't have much to say over dinner any more.

The speaker's diacope on the word "plain" drives the point home: this dinner is far from elegant. But again, the speaker plays upper-class language against this plainness, coining the term "chipware" to describe the couple's dishes. The suffix "-ware" usually describes the material something is made out of, like "earthenware" or "stoneware" pottery; if the couple's dishes are "chipware," they're made mostly of chips and cracks! Similarly, they use "tin flatware," suggesting a comparison with rather more luxurious silverware. This speaker is wry about the couple's beat-up old dishes—but they're also reminding the reader that other old couples, in wealthier homes, aren't eating beans every night.

LINES 5-6

Two who are ...
... lived their day,

The second stanza opens onto a broader picture of the old couple's lives. The speaker describes the pair as "Mostly Good," acknowledging their imperfection and applauding their virtue in the same breath. These two aren't beacons of shining virtue: they're just humans who have tried their best. The capitalization of "Mostly Good" calls attention to the couple's sense of morality; perhaps this is even a moment of free indirect speech, in which the speaker channels the couple's voices as they honestly assess their own behavior.

The statement "Two who are Mostly Good," is neatly contained in an end-stopped line, giving this concise assertion weight and authority. The word "mostly" also hearkens back to the first line, where the couple "eat beans mostly." That repetition subtly

juxtaposes the couple's morality with their poverty—encouraging readers to consider the injustice of their struggles.

The speaker refers to the members of the couple as "Two," briefly allowing the audience to see the couple as consisting of two individual, full, complex people. Still, they are discussed as a unit, sharing the same morality. Thus, the phrase reinforces both their individuality and their closeness. The assonant long /oo/ sound that creates the internal rhyme in "Two who" suggests that the pair have known each other so long, they themselves almost match.

These two lines share many structural similarities. Both begin with the anaphora of "Two who," and both use the same stress patterns:

Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,

Finally, both are end-stopped lines. All of these factors encourage the audience to draw a connection between the two statements, suggesting that those "Mostly Good" lives can be assessed as such because they're nearly over.

LINES 7-8

But keep on ...
... putting things away.

The second stanza ends with a description of the couple's daily routines: just the same humdrum tasks day after day, getting dressed and tidying up, over and over.

The speaker says that the couple "keep[s] on" performing these duties—in spite of the fact that they've already "lived their day." In other words, their lives are essentially over, and yet they keep on living, doing these same monotonous things. The "-ing" verb forms also suggest that they'll keep on doing those things until the *real* ends of their lives come.

This passage features a repetitive iambic (da-DUM) stress pattern:

But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.

The droning rise and fall of the iambs mirrors the dullness of the couple's day-to-day, and the enjambment between these lines also suggests an ongoing, changeless cycle. These two don't get out much, it seems: they're just wearing out the last of their lives, puttering around.

The end-stop that concludes this stanza calls attention to the rhyme between "lived their day" and "putting things away." The rhyme encourages a comparison between the fullness of the couple's past life and their current humdrum conditions. At least to some extent, this old couple's life used to be better.

LINES 9-10

And remembering ... ...
... twinklings and twinges,

The poem's third and final stanza opens with the revelation that, in addition to getting dressed and tidying up, the couple is always "remembering" their past, "with twinklings and twinges."

The consonance between "twinklings" and "twinges" encourages the audience to see these different feelings as two sides of the same coin. While a "twinkling" is a glimmer of good feeling, a "twinge" is a sharp twist of pain. Both kinds of memories, these lines suggest, are welcome visitors: they both offer the couple a reprieve from the tedium of their daily lives. At the same time, the sweetness of these memories seems to reinforce the bleak repetitiveness of their current situation. The juxtaposition of "twinklings and twinges" calls attention to the dual nature of their nostalgia, which is both a comfort and a burden.

This stanza begins with a surprising word: "And." That "And" suggests that these lines are meant to carry on from the previous ones, in which the couple go through their monotonous daily routine—making their memories just another part of that routine! But memory is different from "putting on their clothes / And putting things away." Its little jolts of emotion make a welcome break from the otherwise uninspiring rhythms of their daily lives.

The speaker repeats the word "remembering" without any intervening words, an example of epizeuxis. But between those repetitions, a dreamy ellipsis mimics a drifting train of thought, as if the couple is meandering off into their memories. Those "twinklings" are pretty dreamy, too, evoking a shimmering, starry night sky.

The romantic mood of this passage reflects the sparkling excitement of the couple's memory, in contrast with the dullness of their day-to-day.

LINE 11

As they lean ... vases and fringes.

"The Bean Eaters" ends with an image of the couple huddled over their typical meal of beans, surrounded by piles of clutter. Those beans, recalled from the beginning, bookend the poem with a symbol of the couple's poverty.

The reappearance of beans in the final line draws the reader's attention back to the poem's title, suggesting that society has *defined* the couple by their poverty. The reduction of this "Mostly Good" pair to "Bean Eaters" suggests that society dehumanizes and alienates them for their poverty. The image of the couple's hunched posture as they "lean over the beans" might subtly reinforce the idea that their hard lives and the scorn of the upper classes has beaten them down.

The couple, in their "rented back room," don't have much to call

their own. And what they *do* own seems worn, random, and useless—at least on the surface:

> [...] beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

The audience is left to consider what these items have in common. Perhaps those "beads" are all that's left of a beloved necklace, those tattered "cloths" the remnants of going-out clothes. Perhaps they recall a better time, when the couple grew flowers to fill their "vases" and had children running around the house, playing with "dolls." Whatever they might have meant in the past, those objects are now broken and scattered, ghosts of their former selves.

But the couple treasure their old junk, spending a great deal of time "putting things away." In this way, the clutter also suggests their sense of loss, working as a symbol for the "twinklings and twinges" of their memories.

The poem's final line is by far its longest, accentuating the incredible amount of clutter that fills that "rented back room." This line spills over its boundaries on the page, making the couple's possessions seem literally to pile up. The line's polysyndeton only adds to this effect, suggesting a huge pile-up of odds and ends and creating a droning rhythm. This huge mass of broken-down, sentimental memory is all the couple is left with.

The poem ends on the word "fringes"—just another object in a catalog of objects, at first glance. But the "fringes" are also exactly where this couple live: in a back room, their lives mostly over. Poverty and old age have pushed these two to the margins of society. But in amongst the clutter of their former lives, they still have those "twinklings and twinges"—and each other. This poem leaves the reader with an image of the humanity that persists even in the hardest lives.

SYMBOLS

BEANS

The old couple in this poem "eat beans mostly." This cheap, plentiful food, often used to bulk out a dinner when money is tight, symbolizes poverty. Alongside their battered dishes and their creaking table, the couple's bean-based diet suggests that they don't have much money at all.

Beans don't just turn up twice within the poem, but also right at the start in its title. The reader never learns the couple's names: they're known only as "The Bean Eaters." This suggests that the world views this couple through the lens of class and wealth: they're not Joe and Sue, they're "bean eaters," people defined by their lack of money. Known only by the beans they eat, the couple lose their identity to their poverty.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "beans"
- **Line 11:** "the beans"

CLUTTER

The clutter that fills the couple's modest home—"beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes"—symbolizes their memories, the remains of all that they have lost. These objects are mostly scraps and leftovers: "receipts" are records of a time when a purchase was shiny and new, while "tobacco crumbs" might fall from the stub of a cigarette or an emptied-out pipe. Perhaps those "dolls" belonged to a child, now grown; maybe those "beads" fell from a broken necklace, once worn for nights on the town. The couple's home is "full of" these items: they're surrounded by the remnants of better times.

The couple may be a little buried in all these bits and pieces, but they also cherish them, spending their time "putting things away." The clutter of their house suggests both the burdens and the pleasures of nostalgia.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "things"
- **Line 11:** "beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes"

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

While assonance appears throughout "The Bean Eaters," it's densest in the opening stanza. Take a look at the first line:

> They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.

Assonance emphasizes long /ee/ and /oh/ sounds, encouraging the reader to linger on this image of a worn-out old couple huddled over their beans. The long /ayr/ sounds of "pair," "affair," "chipware," and "flatware" do similar work, drawing attention to the simplicity of the couple's meal and the cheapness of their utensils, highlighting their poverty.

In the following stanza, long /oo/ sounds create internal rhymes:

> Two who are Mostly Good.
> Two who have lived their day,

Here, assonance calls attention to the anaphora of "Two who," and creates a feeling that this old couple are so used to each

other that they just about "rhyme" themselves.

The poem's final long line is a list of the many items that jog the couple's memories:

> As they lean over the beans in their rented back
> room that is full of beads and receipts and dolls and
> cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

The /ee/ and assonance here is both musical and meaningful: those repeated vowel sounds fall pleasantly on the ear, but they also subtly evoke the monotony of the couple's routines and the heaps of mementos they live in.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "eat," "beans," "mostly," "old," "yellow," "pair"
- **Line 2:** "affair"
- **Line 3:** "chipware"
- **Line 4:** "flatware"
- **Line 5:** "Two," "who"
- **Line 6:** "Two," "who"
- **Line 11:** "lean," "beans," "beads," "receipts"

CONSONANCE

Consonance subtly shapes the poem's mood and helps to create its immersive atmosphere. For example, take a look at the plosive /p/ and ticking /t/ sounds in lines 3 and 4:

> Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
> Tin flatware.

These emphatic repeated consonants mimic the tap and click of cheap "Tin flatware" on "Plain chipware." Along with that onomatopoeically "creaking" table, this is a full sound-picture of dinner at the old couple's house. The sound of cutlery on dishes also hints that the couple don't have too much to say as they eat; they might have run out of conversation a decade or two back!

On a different note, the consonant /tw/ sounds in "twinklings and twinges" suggest the little sparks of memory in which the couple takes comfort. In memory, "twinklings" of joy and "twinges" of pain go hand-in-hand, two sides of the same coin.

At the end of the poem, sibilant /s/ and /z/ sounds proliferate when the speaker describes the clutter that surrounds the couple:

> [...] beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco
> crumbs, vases and fringes.

Here, sibilance calls attention to just how many odds and ends there are lying around the old couple's house: there are multiples of all these bits of clutter.

Consonance, then, evokes both the messiness of the physical world around the couple and the quiet, persistent sparkle of their memories.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Plain," "chipware," "plain"
- **Line 4:** "Tin," "flatware"
- **Line 10:** "twinklings," "twinges"
- **Line 11:** "beads," "receipts," "dolls," "cloths," "tobacco," "crumbs," "vases," "fringes"

END-STOPPED LINE

The many end-stops in "The Bean Eaters" magnify the natural pauses that follow each line, creating a slow cadence that reflects the old couple's slow-paced life.

For instance, take a look at the poem's first two lines:

> They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
> Dinner is a casual affair.

Both of these lines come to a complete halt with a period. The reader can almost hear the old couple pausing to catch their breath as they shuffle around preparing for dinner.

The lines that follow all come to similar end-stops—until line 7, the only enjambment in the poem:

> But keep on putting on their clothes
> And putting things away.

In contrast with the halting quality of the end-stopped lines, this enjambment mirrors the monotony of the couple's lives: just as they "keep on putting on their clothes," the thought keeps on going over the line break.

In the last stanza of the poem, a dreamy end-stop evokes the way the two old folks drift off into their memories:

> And remembering...

That wandering ellipsis also provides a rhythmic contrast with the final line's drawn-out list of mementoes and rubbish. The movement from end-stops into that last long sentence suggests the difference between the couple's outer and inner worlds: while their lives are small and circumscribed now, their pasts are chock-full of memory and event.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pair."
- **Line 2:** "affair."
- **Line 3:** "wood,"
- **Line 4:** "flatware."

- **Line 5:** "Good."
- **Line 6:** "day,"
- **Line 8:** "away."
- **Line 9:** "remembering ..."
- **Line 10:** "twinges,"
- **Line 11:** "fringes."

IMAGERY

Detailed imagery paints a picture of the couple's life that's both bleak and cozy, sad and warm. This effect starts in the very first line, where the couple are "this old yellow pair"; readers might picture yellowing paper or a once-white pair of shoes. This isn't just an image of age, but of neglect, suggesting that the couple has not been looked after properly, like a book whose pages have been allowed to oxidize. But the couple are also a "pair," a matched set, as necessary to each other as a left and right shoe.

Later, the two old folks "lean over the beans," an image that suggests they're hunched over their meal in a way that feels informal, cozy, and humble—but perhaps also suggests that their backs are bent from old age and hard work.

The speaker also uses imagery to bring the couple's environment to life. They eat with "Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood, / Tin flatware"—cheap, beat-up dishes and furniture. And their home is crowded with "beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes." All of their possessions are as worn-out as they are: there are loose "beads" that were once a necklace, and "receipts" documenting old purchases that were once shiny and new. The speaker's long list of these objects suggests that the couple refuses to discard them, perhaps out of nostalgia, perhaps because they can't afford replacements. The imagery here develops the symbolic significance of clutter, which comes to represent the couple's past and all that they have lost.

In general, imagery produces a clear picture of the couple's poverty, old age, and nostalgia. Vivid details make this poem's world feel real—and thus all the more affecting.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "old yellow pair"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood, / Tin flatware"
- **Line 11:** "they lean over the beans," "their rented back room that is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes"

METAPHOR

The poem's biggest metaphor appears right in its first line. The couple's staple diet of "beans" is a metaphor for their poverty, and for the kinds of lives they can live under poverty's strictures. Cheap, plentiful beans are often associated with poverty in the U.S., and their appearance here tells readers all they need to know about the couple's financial situation. Those beans even escape the couple's plates and become their very identity: the poem's title calls the pair "The Bean Eaters," suggesting that the world can't see past their poverty to their real human lives.

The end of the poem also makes metaphorical hay from the couple's literal circumstances. Here, in a final long line, the speaker describes the clutter that surrounds the pair in their "rented back room": "beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes." This heap of junk is a metaphor for memory itself. In their house and their minds alike, the couple are surrounded by scraps of their former lives. Many of these objects—like many memories!—are just little bits and pieces, fragments of a lost whole, and they speak to other things the couple might have lost: those "beads" from a broken necklace might represent an old woman's lost youthful beauty, and those "dolls" might remind the pair of their grown-up children.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair."
- **Line 11:** "As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes."

REPETITION

Repetition creates both atmosphere and meaning throughout "The Bean Eaters." For instance, consider the diacope in lines 7-8:

> But keep on putting on their clothes
> And putting things away.

The repeated words here mirror the repetitive actions they describe, evoking the tedious tasks the couple performs day in and day out.

But earlier in the same stanza, the speaker uses repetition for quite a different purpose. Here, anaphora helps to raise the reader's sympathy for:

> Two who are Mostly Good.
> Two who have lived their day,

The repetition of "Two" gives the couple their separate identities—if only for a second. But the internal rhyme here also suggests they've become a lot like each other over the course of their long marriage. There's something sweet and sad about these "Two," who have lived long lives together, doing their best, but whose good years are over.

There's a subtler repetition, here, too: the return of the word

"Mostly," hearkening back to the beans the couple "mostly" eat in the first line. That diacope subtly links their morality to the fact that beans are their staple diet, asking readers to reflect on the injustice of this "Mostly Good" couple's poverty.

Epizeuxis on the word "remembering" also evokes the action it describes:

> And **remembering**...
> **Remembering**, with twinklings and twinges,

This repetition has an almost chant-like effect, working with the dreamy ellipsis to suggest the way the couple drift off into their memories.

Finally, the poem's last line makes vivid use of polysyndeton:

> [...] their rented back room that is full of beads **and** receipts **and** dolls **and** cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases **and** fringes.

Those repeated "ands" evoke the vast heap of clutter that the couple holds on to, bombarding the reader with more and more useless little objects.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mostly"
- **Line 3:** "Plain," "ware," "plain"
- **Line 4:** "ware"
- **Line 5:** "Two who," "Mostly"
- **Line 6:** "Two who"
- **Line 7:** "on," "putting," "on"
- **Line 8:** "putting"
- **Line 9:** "remembering"
- **Line 10:** "Remembering"
- **Line 11:** "and," "and," "and," "and"

VOCABULARY

Yellow (Line 1) - Damaged by age, like paper that has yellowed over time. "Yellow" has also historically been used as a derogatory term for a light-skinned Black person.

Chipware (Line 3) - Damaged dishes. Brooks is making a quiet joke here: since the suffix "-ware" describes a kind of pottery, like "stoneware" or "earthenware," "chipware" suggests a kind of pottery made mostly out of cracks and chips!

Flatware (Line 4) - Cutlery—knives and forks. "Tin flatware" would be pretty cheap and flimsy.

Twinklings (Line 10) - Glimmers or sparkles of delight and amusement.

Twinges (Line 10) - Little stabs of physical or emotional pain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Bean Eaters" doesn't use any conventional, established poetic form, but rather invents its own. It's built from two quatrains, or four-line stanzas, followed by one tercet, or three-line stanza (though the length of the final line might make that last stanza *look* like a quatrain at first glance).

This simple shape reflects the old couple's life. The two four-line stanzas suggest the monotony of their days, setting up an expectation that the next stanza will be just the same. But then the final three-line stanza, in which the couple start "remembering," breaks from the established pattern. This break suggests that the couple's memories offer relief from the boredom and weariness of their routines.

The third stanza also breaks from routine with its long, long final line, which lists all the seemingly useless items that fill the couple's home and jog their memories. This line suggests both the overwhelming clutter of the couple's apartment and their long, long lives.

METER

This poem doesn't follow a consistent meter. Instead, it uses easy, natural rhythms that sound almost like normal speech, reflecting the poem's everyday subject. For instance, take a look at the stresses in the first two lines:

> They **eat beans mostly**, this **old yellow pair**.
> **Dinner is a casual affair**.

Here, without moving into a regular pattern, stresses lean on the couple's age and habits: the beans they mostly eat and their aged yellowness.

However, the speaker sometimes settles into an iambic (da-DUM) rhythm, as in lines 7-8:

> But **keep** on **putting** on their **clothes**
> And **putting things** away.

The steady rise and fall of the iambs evokes the monotony of the couple's daily life. Similarly, the regular rhythm of line 11 suggests the pile-up of old junk in the couple's apartment:

> [...] is **full** of **beads** and **receipts** and **dolls** and **cloths**,
> to**bacco crumbs**, **vases** and **fringes**.

Here, the steady march of stresses (along with the polysyndeton of all those "ands") makes it seem as if this list of clutter could go on forever.

The movement between irregular, conversational rhythms and regular, pulsing ones mimics the couple's life: repetitive, but

enlivened by occasional “twinklings and twinges” of memory.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Bean Eaters" doesn't have a rigid rhyme scheme—but it does use a lot of rhyme. Its rhymes follow this irregular pattern:

AABA BCDC EFF

There's also some internal rhyme here, like the repeated "Two who" in the poem's second stanza.

The poem's rhymes evoke the humble repetitions of the couple's daily life: recalled sounds echo their always-the-same day-to-day routines, as well as the "remembering" that is so central to their shared life.

Rhyme might also subtly reinforce the couple's close companionship. Perhaps these "Two who are Mostly Good" have known each other so long that they rhyme, too.

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is a third-person observer who guides the audience through the scene with plain, straightforward language. This speaker is also omniscient, able to see inside the old couple 's minds and reflect on their feelings and thoughts.

Brooks often uses this kind of removed-but-sympathetic third-person speaker in her poetry, a choice that helps her poems to present stark realities objectively. Rather than making the poem *less* moving, the speaker's slight distance from the scene leaves plenty of room for the reader's own feelings. The narrator's subtlety suggests that this old couple's experience speaks for itself: it's poignant enough without emotive commentary.

SETTING

"The Bean Eaters" is set in an elderly couple's tiny, well-worn apartment. Brooks's own comments about the collection in which this poem appears suggest a specific time and place for that apartment: mid-20th century Chicago, likely in the Bronzeville neighborhood. Within the poem itself, howeve, the setting isn't made quite so specific—a choice that allows readers to draw on their personal experiences as they imagine the scene.

This apartment is a "back room" with plain, broken-down furniture. The couple doesn't own the place but rents it, and perhaps has lived there for quite a long time: the pair has accumulated a whole roomful of odds and ends. There's a sense here that the apartment, like the couple, has seen better days. While the apartment is dingy and isolated, it's also full of memories, "twinklings and twinges" that take the couple back to old times.

The apartment's combination of clutter and warmth, broken-down furniture and sweet nostalgia, suggests both the couple's poverty and the deeper value of their lives.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“The Bean Eaters” is the title work of Brooks’s 1960 collection of poetry, which explores hope and injustice through the lens of everyday life in the Chicago neighborhood where Brooks grew up.

Brooks felt her poetic career was split into three distinct eras. Her earliest work was lyrical, focused on self-expression; her mid-period focused on politics, advocating for racial harmony. *The Bean Eaters* comes from her mid-period, and the (largely white) literary world praised it for its “wider appeal." But finally, Brooks devoted herself to Black poetics: poetry by, about, and for Black people.

The artistic innovations and organizing efforts of Black artists in the 1960s propelled Brooks into her Black poetics phase. Brooks attended the Second Black Writer’s Conference at Fisk University in 1967 and supported the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which reflected the ideals of the Black Power Movement in an artistic context. Rather than trying to gain a stronger foothold in exclusive, white-dominated literary institutions, BAM artists aimed to speak to and strengthen Black communities by creating their own aesthetics, support networks, and institutions. Brooks would publish her later collections with the two major independent presses associated with BAM—Broadside and Third World Press—as well as her own small press.

Brooks's parents encouraged her to write from a young age: her father often recited the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar at home. Like Dunbar, Brooks explored Black American culture both sympathetically and critically. Another important influence was the acclaimed Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes. Brooks was only a teenager when she met him at a local church; he would become her great friend, offering mentorship and writing glowing reviews of her work.

As a young woman, Brooks joined a Black writers' workshop led by Inez Cunningham Stark, a formative experience for her. Also in attendance were such luminaries as Margaret Taylor Burroughs, Alice Walker, and Margaret E. Danner. Brooks herself became a mentor when she started her own poetry workshop in the late '60s, where she worked with leading BAM figures Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Haki R. Madhubuti.

Brooks became one of the most celebrated American writers of the 20th century: among other honors, she won the Pulitzer Prize, becoming the first Black American to do so.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early to mid-20th century, the United States saw a massive population shift known as the Great Migration. During this time, some six million Black Americans relocated from the (rural) south to industrial urban areas in the north, west, and midwest. Hoping to escape the discrimination, racial violence, and economic depression of the Jim Crow South, Black Americans faced *increasing* discrimination and violence in northern areas as housing and employment became more competitive.

In Chicago, housing options for Black Americans were highly restricted, forcing them into a "Black Belt." This neighborhood became known as Bronzeville, and became the center of Black life and culture in Chicago, a vibrant community that gave birth to innovations in fields from medicine to film to journalism.

As Bronzeville prospered, white property owners introduced their own competitor businesses, hoping to capitalize on the Black community's success. When the Great Depression hit in 1929, many Black-owned businesses were forced to close, while white-owned companies were able to secure financial backing. Furthermore, overcrowding, neglect from white landlords, and "urban renewal" initiatives meant Bronzeville residents suffered displacement, demolitions, and discrimination.

Brooks grew up in Bronzeville and lived in Chicago all her life. While she had a relatively comfortable childhood, she still experienced racism, colorism, and sexism, and felt that it was important to truthfully represent the prejudices that infect communities from both outside and within. Brooks became deeply involved with progressive politics and community organizing, regularly publishing poetry in the *Chicago Defender* and joining the NAACP Youth Council as a teenager.

In the 1930s, when Brooks had a family of her own, she was forced to move frequently due to a lack of housing for Black people in Chicago. Brooks famously received news that she had won the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry on the same day her electricity was turned off because her family couldn't afford the bill. While Brooks eventually became a prominent (and financially stable) poet, her work stayed grounded in day-to-day life in Chicago.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks — Read a collection of interviews with the author. The first interview contains a brief discussion of "The Bean Eaters." (https://books.google.com.vn/books?id=E_bG0NPrpV8C&printsec=frontcover&dq=conversa
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Brooks reciting a selection of her poetry, including "The Bean Eaters." Her reading of "The Bean Eaters" begins at 22:10. (https://www.loc.gov/item/94838388)
- Biography of Gwendolyn Brooks — Read an overview of the poet's life and works. (https://www.africanamericanpoetry.org/gwendolyn-brooks)
- The Love Between Hughes and Brooks — Learn more about the relationship between the author and her mentor, acclaimed Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes. (https://www.aaihs.org/the-love-between-langston-hughes-and-gwendolyn-brooks/)
- The Black Arts Movement — Read a detailed history of the Black Arts Movement, of which Brooks was a member. (https://aalbc.com/authors/article.php?id=2087)
- Digital Access to the Collection — Read Brooks's 1960 poetry collection, which is titled after this poem. (https://archive.org/details/beaneaters00broo/mode/2up)
- The History of Bronzeville, Chicago's "Black Metropolis" — Watch a video interview with a resident of Chicago's Bronzeville district, the neighborhood that inspired much of Brooks's work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6WRG66ZwU0&ab_channel=TheLanguage%26Life)
-

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GWENDOLYN BROOKS POEMS

- We Real Cool

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Soa, Jackson. "*The Bean Eaters.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 4 Nov 2020. Web. 4 Jan 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Soa, Jackson. "*The Bean Eaters.*" LitCharts LLC, November 4, 2020. Retrieved January 4, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/gwendolyn-brooks/the-bean-eaters.