We Real Cool

SUMMARY

Seven pool players are hanging out at the Golden Shovel pool hall.

We're very cool. We skipped school. We stay out late. We don't pull our punches. We praise bad behavior. We drink cheap alcohol. We make June jazzy. We're going to die soon.

THEMES

REBELLION, YOUTH, AND MORTALITY

"We Real Cool" is a poem about rebellion—and its costs. The poem is spoken by a group of seven teenagers hanging out outside a pool hall. These teens present themselves as rebels who skip school, stay out late, and party hard. On the one hand, these pool players stand in for everyone who's played hooky—for all teenagers who push back against authority and do their own thing. Yet the poem also suggests that such rebelliousness has serious costs: it makes these young people less safe. The price of living fast, the poem implies, is to die young.

The speakers of "We Real Cool" stress the ways in which their lives defy social convention. They cut class and "lurk" late into the night. They get into fights and drink. They're hardly model students or citizens. But for most of the poem, the speakers are proud of their transgressions. They aren't ashamed to be rebellious: instead, they "sing sin." In other words, they praise and celebrate their own behavior.

But the poem consistently suggests that things are more ambiguous than the speakers acknowledge. Note, for instance, the name of the pool hall where they hang out, "The Golden Shovel." The shovel is "golden"—fancy, expensive—but it's still something that people use to dig holes, ditches, and graves. It may be glamorous, but it's still a *shovel*. In this way, the subtitle of the poem subtly suggests that the reader shouldn't take the speakers at their word: that they shouldn't entirely fall for the surface-level glamor or pleasure of their rebellious lifestyle, because this rebellion—for all its fun—is still the "shovel" digging their own graves, the nail in their coffins.

The speakers themselves admit that their rebellion does have a serious cost: they will "Die soon." It's important that this line comes at the end of the poem. Were it to appear in the beginning, it might suggest that the speakers are responding to the fleeting nature of life—that they're wringing every last drop of enjoyment out of their time on earth before it inevitably ends. This *is* a possible interpretation, but the fact that the phrase "we die soon" comes only after all this description of rebellion makes sit more likely that such death is the *result* of this rebellion. That is, living life with abandon brings the speakers closer to death.

The poem thus has a complicated, ambivalent relationship with the rebellious people it describes. On the one hand, the poem seems to take joy in their transgressive attitudes. But on the other hand, it meditates with pathos and sincerity on the way that youthful rebellion can cut lives short.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-8

REBELLION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

"We Real Cool" consistently acknowledges the costs associated with its speakers' rebellious lifestyles. They may lead glamorous, pleasurable lives—but they're also in danger as a direct result of their behavior. At the heart of the poem, then, is a question about whether the sacrifices the speakers make are worthwhile. The poem doesn't answer this question directly—and it's definitely possible to read the poem as a condemnation of the speakers. But it's also possible to look at their acts of rebellion as a direct and necessary challenge to authority and social complacency. This is especially true when considering the moment when the poem was written, at the height of the American Civil Rights movement.

In one interpretation of the poem, the speakers are simply wasting their lives. Instead of getting an education, preparing to enter the workforce, and making a difference in society, they stay out late, get drunk, and listen to jazz. When they die, they do so having failed to make an impact on the world—or having done anything to make their lot in life better.

However, the poem provides some hints that the speakers' rebellion isn't entirely pointless or in vain. Their rebellion is directed, focused. They rebel against symbols of authority and power, like the "school." Similarly, when they say they "Jazz June," they might have something more significant in mind than just listening to music on a summer night. "June" might be interpreted as another symbol for authority. More precisely, it could be read as a symbol for the complacent, unquestioning lives that many people—particularly people who benefit from the way society is organized—lead. In fact, in interviews, Brooks has suggested that she understood "June" in this way when she was writing the poem.

To "Jazz June" is thus to disrupt this pleasant complacency—to make people think about the ways in which society needs to be

changed. And since the poem itself closely imitates the rhythms of jazz in its sound, it's possible to think of this moment as describing the poem's own aspirations: like the speakers, the poem itself wants to disrupt, to cause people to question the way society (or literature) is organized.

For Brooks, writing at the height of the American Civil Rights Movement, this kind of rebellion—and the questioning it hopes to inspire—is likely connected with the struggle for black civil rights. Though the delinquent figures she describes aren't presented as social justice leaders, the poet may be dignifying their rebelliousness by putting it into a poem, and subtly trying to connect it to broader demands for social change. Alternatively, it's possible to understand the poem as presenting the pool players as examples of the detrimental effects of racism on black communities: without meaningful opportunities to improve their lives, the speakers turn to petty crime. In either case, the poem makes a powerful but implicit case for social change—specifically for a challenge against the power structures of a society that allows prejudice and oppression to thrive.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-2

The Pool Players. ...
... Left school.

"We Real Cool" begins with a subtitle. This subtitle sets the scene for the poem, showing the reader where the poem happens and who its speakers are: a group of "seven" "pool players." They're hanging out at a pool hall, called the "Golden Shovel."

This may be a real place; in interviews, poet Gwendolyn Brooks describes how the poem was inspired by seeing a group of teenagers hanging out outside a pool hall in her neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. Regardless, the name of the pool hall hints at some of the poem's themes. On the one hand, it's "golden"—which makes it sound glamorous, expensive, and alluring. But, on the other, it's a "shovel": a tool that people use to dig graves, holes, and ditches. The name of the pool hall thus suggests that it is both a dangerous and alluring place: while it may look enticing, it also might lead someone to, metaphorically, dig their own grave.

This tension between glamor and danger is central to the poem—and it appears in the poem's first two lines. The poem begins with two simple, straightforward statements. The speakers of the poem declare that they are "real cool." Then they declare that they "left school." In the opening lines of the poem, the speakers present themselves as rebels and delinquents: they refuse to stick to the straight and narrow; they rebel against authority and conformity, which is symbolized here by "school." At the same time, they present themselves as glamorous: they're "cool." Already, the poem also hints at the costs of their coolness: they're missing out on the chance to get an education—and that may hurt their opportunities in life.

The speakers don't use any kind of connecting or subordinating words to link the sentences in lines 1 and 2 together—there's no "therefore" or "because." Instead, they leave it up to the readers to decide if there is a connection between the two sentences: if the speakers "left school" because they think that's the "cool" thing to do. This is an example of parataxis, and it establishes a pattern that the poem will follow throughout. The speakers never tell the reader how to put all these pieces together.

The sound of the poem, however, can help the reader unfold connections that the speakers otherwise leave ambiguous. For instance the consonant /l/ sounds that appear in "real cool" and "left school" suggest that there *is* a connection to be made here—that the speakers leave school because they think it's the cool thing to do. This is supported by the assonant /oo/ sound in "cool" and "school" too.

Indeed, "We Real Cool" is rich in sound. Each of the poem's sentences is *exactly* three syllables long; all of them start with "We." All of the poem's lines—except the last—are enjambed. The poem is written in couplets, but the rhymes are internal: "cool" and "school" are perfect rhymes, for example, but they fall inside the line, not at its end. All of these different patterns work with each other to create a syncopated, jazzy rhythm (syncopation is a musical term that describes an unexpected break in the rhythm of a piece of music). Thus although the poem doesn't follow a traditional form (such as, say, the sonnet), it has strict rules—and those rules help it sound like a piece of jazz music.

LINES 2-6

We ...
... Thin gin.

In lines 2-6, the speakers of "We Real Cool" describe their rebellious and dangerous lives. They stay out late and get into fights. When they do, they don't pull any punches: they "strike straight." And they aren't ashamed of their behavior: instead, using a metaphor, they say that they "sing sin." In other words, they celebrate rebellion and transgression: they're proud of the way that their actions challenge prevailing social norms. Finally, they drink cheap gin, watering it down to make it last longer.

The speakers seem dangerous and threatening: they "lurk" in the shadows late at night, waiting to jump out and attack; they are drunk and violent. The alliteration between "lurk" and late

emphasizes this sense of danger, as does the assonance in "late" and "straight." The alliteration makes the night seem threatening; the assonance underlines the violence the speakers are willing to do in the night.

At the same time, though, the speakers come across as genuinely rebellious figures, uninhibited and proud. The alliteration in line 5 emphasizes their pride and independence: linking together "sing" and "sin" it makes it feel more natural to celebrate the things that society has decided are "sin[s]." (At the same time, the parataxis between "We / Sing sin" and "We / Thin gin" might suggest that the speakers' are only willing to celebrate their transgressions because they're drunk!)

Their rebelliousness might call into question some of the limitations of a society which, at the time the poem was written in the late 1950s, was wrestling with some serious issues—like segregation. Once again, the poem remains ambiguous about how the reader should understand the pool players—they are glamorous, dangerous, rebellious, and possibly revolutionary, all at once.

These lines again follow the strict—and unusual—formal pattern established in lines 1-2. Their rhymes fall inside the lines, not at their ends. In other words, they are internal rhymes. Each line—and each sentence—is three syllables long. But the poem's line breaks and the sentences don't actually align. Instead, each line is enjambed, toppling over into the next. Take lines 3 and 4:

> Lurk late. We
> Strike straight. We

These enjambments act like a syncopated beat in a measure of music: they give the poem the energy and rhythm of a piece of jazz music.

LINES 6-8

We ...
... Die soon.

"We Real Cool" ends with two powerful—and ambiguous—sentences. These sentences are key to interpreting the poem, but there's not necessarily a *correct* interpretation of them. It's possible to understand these final lines as an *indictment* or criticism of the speakers for wasting their lives. But it's also possible to take these final lines as presenting the speakers as brave heroes of sorts, as young people who fight back against authority and complacency—and pay for this necessary rebellion with their lives.

The trouble begins with an apparently simple sentence: "We / Jazz June." Readers might take this to mean that the speakers listen to jazz music during the month of June. This seems a bit frivolous: instead of pursuing an education, the speakers of the poem are just hanging out and listening to jazz. In other words, read this way, the poem becomes a bit judgmental. The speakers may "sing sin," but the poem *itself* doesn't seem to approve of the way these young people are wasting their lives.

But there's another possible way to interpret these lines. "June" can be taken as a symbol for authority and complacency: after all, June is an easy, unchallenging month. It's a time of year that pretty much everyone likes—and that doesn't make much of a demand on anyone. By "jazz[ing] June," the speakers are metaphorically making it more complex, more demanding: they are challenging people who live pleasant lives without questioning the social rules that bind them.

Though the poem is ambiguous—it never decides for the reader how to interpret it—this second reading does fit with a key moment earlier in the poem. Remember that "school" is also a symbol for authority and conformity. The poem might be read as returning those forces in its final lines, stressing the way the speakers' rebelliousness challenges them, calls them into question. In this case, the poem is less interested in *judging* the speakers and more interested in *celebrating* them. While they may be dangerous and delinquent, they are challenging authority in a brave and necessary way.

This question is important for understanding the poem itself. The poem carefully echoes the rhythms of jazz, using its enjambments to mimic the syncopated rhythm of this music. If one takes "Jazz" as a symbolic challenge to authority and complacency, then the poem *itself* has the same power and force: like the speakers, it too "Jazz[es] June."

The poem ends with a startling and sad admission. Whether brave or foolish, this rebellious lifestyle will have a serious cost: the speakers will die young. In other words, they pay for their rebellious pleasures with their lives. Readers might take this in a purely negative way: they're throwing their lives away. Or readers might understand this final moment a more positive, but still sad, manner: this is the price the speakers pay for defying the norms of an oppressive society.

The poem's final line breaks the structural rules that the poem has set up so far in a number of surprising and important ways. Each line (except the first) has three syllables; each line is enjambed. That continues right up until line 8. But line 8 is just two syllables long: "Die soon." And it's end-stopped. It thus feels abrupt, a sudden break—as abrupt and cut off as the speakers' lives. If the poem has been imitating the rhythms of jazz, this feels like a record skipping off a turn-table.

SYMBOLS

SCHOOL

In "We Real Cool," "school" is a symbol for authority and conformity. The speakers of "We Real Cool" are delinquents—they're skipping school to hang out at a pool hall and get drunk. For them, school isn't just a place to get an

education. School represents the straight and narrow, the path people are supposed to take through life. In other words, it represents everything the speakers of "We Real Cool" reject. They turn their backs on normality in favor of rebellious pleasures. They refuse to be ordinary and complacent.

Of course, the poem leaves it open to interpretation whether this is a *good* thing or not. On the one hand, the speakers challenge social orders that might *need* to be challenged. On the other, they pay a high price for doing so: as they admit in the poem's final lines, "We / Die soon."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "school"

JUNE

In "We Real Cool" "June" is a complicated symbol that, in one interpretation, represents complacency. After all, June is a very pleasant, usually happy time of year. The speakers, though, don't seem to love June—instead they "Jazz" it. In other words, they change it, transform it—introducing "Jazz" into it, a syncopated, vibrant, and often improvised kind of music. For the speakers, June seems a little boring: it needs to be jazzed up. Thus, one might also understand "June" as a symbol for the status quo: all the things the speakers rebel against.

This symbolic reading of "June" is strengthened by Brooks's own comments on the poem (available in the "Resources" section of this guide). In interviews, she argues that, for her, "June" is a symbol of complacency and comfort: it represents people who go with the flow, who don't rebel against society.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "June"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

Almost every line of "We Real Cool" is enjambed. (Only the poem's final line is end-stopped.) The poem also follows a strict pattern in the way that it uses this enjambment. Every line except the last line ends with the word "We." After each enjambment, the speakers describe one of the rebellious things they've done or are doing. Take the poem's opening lines:

> We real cool. We
> Left school. We
> Lurk late…

The poem's use of enjambment fits in with its other patterns. For instance, note that each sentence in the poem is exactly three words—and exactly three syllables—long. And all the sentences follow the same format. They start with the word "We" and then describe an action. They are paratactic sentences: the speaker doesn't use words like "because" or "therefore" to describe the relationship between them. These carefully structured, repetitive lines are key to the poem's rhythm.

The poem's enjambments create the feeling of syncopation, which is a disruption in the expected rhythm of a piece of music. Because the enjambments break the poem's sentences in key places, separating "we" (the grammatical subject of the sentence) from its verb, they create a surprising pause, a hiccup in the rhythm of the sentence. (When Brooks reads the poem, she emphasizes this pause, drawing it out dramatically.) The enjambments are thus key to the music of the poem: through their regular, syncopated beat, the poem takes on the rhythm of jazz music.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "We / Left"
- **Lines 2-3:** "We / Lurk"
- **Lines 3-4:** "We / Strike"
- **Lines 4-5:** "We / Sing"
- **Lines 5-6:** "We / Thin"
- **Lines 6-7:** "We / Jazz"
- **Lines 7-8:** "We / Die"

END-STOPPED LINE

"We Real Cool" contains only one end-stop. It falls in the final line of the poem:

> … We
> Die soon.

Otherwise, the speakers use as little end-stop as possible: all the rest of the poem's lines are enjambed. These enjambments give the poem its syncopated, jazzy rhythm. So the final line doesn't just feel like the end of a *poem*—it also feels like the end of a piece of *music*, the band coming to resolution and rest. Or, at least, it should feel like that. But this ending doesn't quite feel like a resolution. It feels more like the needle skipping off a record in the middle of a song: an abrupt, unexpected break.

Indeed, the speakers come to this end-stop at a striking and important point in the poem. Only in the poem's final line do they admit the costs of their rebellious lives. Their lives are destined to be brief; they will "die soon." The end-stop reinforces the power of this proclamation. Coming at the end of the poem, it feels like a kind of death itself. Further, line 8 is only two syllables long; lines 2-7 are all three syllables. And all the

other lines all end with the word we, but line 8 ends with the word "soon"; there's a gap, a noticeable blank space, at the end of line 8, where the word "we" could or should appear. The line thus feels abrupt, cut off, and unnatural—a real break from the rest of the poem's rhythm. This abrupt break, this sudden ending echoes and reinforces how short the speakers' lives are—unnaturally so. Just like the poem, their lives end suddenly and abruptly.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "soon."

CAESURA

"We Real Cool" has a caesura in almost every line—and the poem's caesuras always fall in the same place, following a strict pattern. One can see this pattern in lines 3-4:

> Lurk late. We
> Strike straight. We. ..

Each of these lines is three syllables long, and there's a caesura in both lines after the second syllable. The placement of these caesuras reflects the organization of the poem's sentences, which are also just three syllables long. All of the poem's sentences also start with the word "We"; the rest of the sentence describes something rebellious that speakers do or have done.

The speakers carefully deploy these simple sentences: with the enjambments that fall at the end of each line, they become subtly rhythmic and echo the rhythm of a jazz beat. And if the poem's enjambments serve as the syncopated beat in a measure of jazz music, the caesuras mark the end of that measure. In other words, the end of each of the poem's sentences feels like the close of a bar of music. These moments of closure and resolution fall in the *middle* of the lines: the speaker uses caesuras to mark them, rather than, say, end-stop. As a result, the caesuras play a key role in the poem's rhythm: they not only mark the end of each of its units, they also set the stage for the syncopated enjambments that fall at the end of each of its lines.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cool. We"
- **Line 2:** "school. We"
- **Line 3:** "late. We"
- **Line 4:** "straight. We"
- **Line 5:** "sin. We"
- **Line 6:** "gin. We"
- **Line 7:** "June. We"

ALLITERATION

The speakers of "We Real Cool" often use alliteration to emphasize and underline how rebellious they are—and how much pride they take in their transgressions. Note for example, the alliterative /l/ sound that appears in lines 2-3:

> Left school. We
> lurk late.

Here, the speakers are saying that they stay out late at night. The word "lurk" gives the passage some threatening undertones: it sounds like the speakers are hiding in the shadows, waiting to jump out and attack someone. The alliteration reinforces this sense of danger. Linking together "lurk" and "late," it makes the night itself seem dangerous and threatening—because the speakers are hanging out, lurking, late into the night.

In lines 4-5, the speakers take a different tack, using an alliterative /s/ sound to emphasize the joy and pride that they feel in their rebellious lives:

> Sing sin.

This is a metaphor. The speakers are saying that they aren't ashamed of the lives they lead; instead, they celebrate their "sin[s]," "sing[ing]" about them. The alliteration between "sing" and "sin" reinforces this sense of pride: creating a bridge between the two things, so that it feels like there's nothing unusual or unexpected in the way that they "sing sin." The poem's alliterations thus reinforce the speakers' rebellious energy, the challenge they pose to authority—and emphasizes the unabashed pride they feel in their transgressive lives.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "L"
- **Line 3:** "L," "l"
- **Line 4:** " St," "st"
- **Line 5:** "S," "s"
- **Line 7:** "J," "J"

ASSONANCE

"We Real Cool" contains a number of instances of assonance. Mostly, these appear as part of the poem's rhyme scheme—specifically, as part of the internal rhymes that run through the poem. For instance, "cool" and "school" in lines 1 and 2 share a common /oo/ sound; "late" and "straight" have a shared /ay/ sound. The assonance overall adds to the poem's jazzy musicality.

The assonance also suggests a connection between the words at hand. For example, the assonant /a/ sound in "late" and "straight" binds the two words together—and, in doing so, it

suggests a link between the two rebellious actions being described. The speakers not only stay out late, lurking in the shadows, but they also hit hard. The assonance between the two lines makes them feel all the more threatening. The same could be said for the assonance of the short /i/ sounds in lines 5 and 6:

> Sing sin. We
> Thin gin. We

The assonance here connects the speakers' pride—their metaphorical singing—to sin, a stand-in for their rebellious, devil-may-care attitudes. It also links drinking cheap booze to this sinful lifestyle, and again suggests that this is something that the speakers celebrate. And in the poem's final moment of assonance, "June" is linked through the /oo/ sound to "soon." The sound of the poem here links the speakers' behavior—their "jazzing" of June—to their untimely deaths.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e," "ea," "oo," "e"
- **Line 2:** "oo"
- **Line 3:** "a"
- **Line 4:** "ai"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "u"
- **Line 8:** "oo"

CONSONANCE

"We Real Cool" uses consonance to emphasize how rebellious its speakers are. For instance, note the consonant /l/ and /k/ sounds that run through lines 1-4:

> We real cool. We
> Left school. We
> Lurk late. We
> Strike straight ....

The /l/ and /k/ sounds links together a series of rebellious acts: skipping school, staying out late, getting in fights. The consonance helps emphasizes just how rebellious the speakers are: each of their separate transgressions piles up, growing in force and power as the passage progresses.

The use of consonance here thus helps the reader make sense of the poem. Because the poem never uses words like "because" or "therefore" to show the reader how its sentences are related to each other, it's up to the reader to construct connections, to build a story. Consonance helps the reader to do so because, as noted in our discussions of assonance and alliteration, these shared sounds draw links between words.

To return to the poem's opening lines as an example, the consonant /l/ sound runs through three otherwise separate sentences and links them together. It suggests a kind of narrative, a story: because the speakers think that they're "real cool," they "le[ave] school" and "lurk late."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "l," "c," "l"
- **Line 2:** "L," "s," "ch," "l"
- **Line 3:** "L," "k," "l," "t"
- **Line 4:** "St," "r," "k," "str," "t"
- **Line 5:** "S," "s," "n"
- **Line 6:** "n," "n"
- **Line 7:** "J," "J," "n"
- **Line 8:** "n"

METAPHOR

"We Real Cool" contains two metaphors. The first appears in lines 4-5, where the speakers claim "We / Sing sin." Here, "sing[ing]" is a metaphor for celebrating their own transgressions. In other words, the speakers aren't literally "sing[ing]" about "sin." Instead, they are applauding sinful, rebellious actions. The metaphor indicates that the speakers of the poem aren't ashamed of themselves or the things they do: instead they "sing" their "sins," praising their own transgressions.

The second metaphor is more complicated and ambiguous. In lines 6-7, the speakers say, "We / Jazz June." It's possible to interpret this in several different ways. On the one hand, the speakers might simply be saying that they listen to jazz in June. On the other hand, the metaphor might be a bit more challenging or confrontational: one could interpret "June" as a symbol for authority and complacency. (This is the interpretation that Brooks herself encourages in interviews about the poem, and we talk about it more in the Symbols section of this guide). In that case "Jazz[ing] June" would describe a pointed act of rebellion, a direct challenge to authority. Because the poem is so compact, the speaker never clears this up—so both interpretations remain possible.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Sing sin"
- **Line 7:** "Jazz June"

PARATAXIS

All of the sentences in "We Real Cool" are paratactic. In other words, the speaker doesn't use any words like "because" or "therefore" to explain the relationships between the sentences. Each sentence simply stands next to each other: it's up to the reader to decide how—and whether—they're related to each other. It's easy to see this at work in lines 4-6:

... We
Sing sin. We
thin gin ...

It's possible to construct a relationship between these sentences even though they lack connecting words. For instance, readers might imagine that the speakers are "sing[ing]" *because* they're drunk—because they've been "thin[ning] gin." And similarly, readers might imagine that the speakers are eager to praise "sin" because alcohol has lowered their inhibitions. But the poem doesn't explicitly spell this out—it's up to the reader to draw the connections.

More broadly, the poem's use of parataxis contributes to its steady, syncopated rhythm. The poem's sentences follow a strict pattern: each sentence is exactly three syllables long, and each sentence starts with the word "we" before describing something rebellious that the speakers do or have done. The poem is so rhythmic and propulsive because it establishes this pattern and then never wavers from it. If the poem used words like "therefore" or "because" to establish the relationships between its sentences, it would break this rhythm. The poem's rhythm is thus partially established and maintained through its use of parataxis.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

VOCABULARY

The Golden Shovel (Before Line 1) - A pool hall in Bronzeville, on the South Side of Chicago. Gwendolyn Brooks lived in this neighborhood.

Lurk (Line 3) - Hang out. The seven pool players stay out late. The word has some sinister undertones: it implies that the pool players are hiding in a threatening way, as if waiting to jump out and attack.

Strike Straight (Line 4) - Literally, this refers to how the players shoot pool—i.e., they're good and rarely miss. The phrase also has some violent undertones. It implies that the pool players don't pull their punches.

Sin (Line 5) - Bad or transgressive behavior. In Christian tradition, *sins* are actions that diminish one's chances of being admitted to heaven. To "Sing sin" is thus to praise such bad behavior.

Thin Gin (Line 6) - To water down alcohol, so it lasts longer.

Jazz (Line 7) - A genre of popular music that originated in African-American communities in the late 19th and early 20th century in places like New Orleans and Chicago. Here, the speaker uses *jazz* as a verb—even though it's usually a noun. The pool players are putting "jazz" into "June": in other words, they are complicating it, making it cool, syncopated, and challenging—just like jazz itself.

June (Line 7) - A month in the early summer. In interviews, the poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, has argued that "June" symbolizes conformity and the establishment, because it is pleasant, unchallenging, and unobjectionable. However, the reader doesn't have to follow Brooks' intentions—one could interpret the line as simply meaning that the pool players listen to jazz in the month of June.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"We Real Cool" has eight lines cut up into four two-line stanzas, or couplets. While the poem doesn't have a regular meter, most of its lines have three syllables and it *does* have a regular rhyme scheme. Unlike most rhymed poems, however, these rhymes are internal—they fall inside the line, rather than at its end. And with the exception of the poem's final line, every line is enjambed.

"We Real Cool" has a complicated but carefully controlled form, even if it doesn't follow the rules of more traditional forms (such as the sonnet or the villanelle). Instead, Brooks invents her own structure for "We Real Cool," and she does so to capture the rhythms of the pool players' speech. In line 7, they note that they "Jazz June," and the poem itself is fittingly close to jazz in its rhythms. The enjambments at the end of each line syncopate the poem, giving it the swing and hiccup of the music that the pool players listen to. And in doing so, the poem asserts that there is something musical and beautiful about the way these young people talk.

METER

"We Real Cool" doesn't have a regular meter—at least not in a traditional sense. However, most of its lines have three syllables (the first line has four syllables and its final line has two) and all of the poem's sentences are exactly three syllables long. This helps it feel rhythmic and musical despite not having a meter.

Specifically, the poem imitates the syncopated rhythms of jazz. Syncopation describes music that is swinging and offbeat in a controlled way (from ragtime to jazz to hip hop). Jazz is generally played in 4/4 time. In other words, jazz has four beats per measure. Since the lines and sentences in "We Real Cool" are only *three* syllables long, they would seem to be missing a beat. However, the missing beat can be found in the enjambment at the end of each of the poem's lines. After each enjambment, the poem pauses for a moment—a beat. (Indeed, when Brooks reads the poem aloud, she takes an exaggerated pause at the end of each line: "We / Left school. We [beat] ...")

The missing beat that one hears in the poem's enjambment *helps* the poem sound syncopated: it mimics the off-kilter rhythms of jazz. Readers can hear this syncopated rhythm in the poem's opening lines:

> We real cool. We
> left school. We [beat]

Thus while the poem doesn't follow any of the established meters for English poetry, it has a very strong rhythm. It uses three syllables per sentence and (mostly) per line in combination with enjambment to capture the syncopated rhythms of jazz.

RHYME SCHEME

"We Real Cool" is written in rhyming couplets—sort of. The poem's rhyme scheme is:

AABBCCDD

However, there's a catch. None of the poem's rhymes appear where one normally expects to find a rhyme—at the end of a line. Instead, they all appear inside the lines: they are examples of internal rhyme.

By using internal rhyme instead of end rhyme, Brooks shifts and *syncopates* the rhythm of the poem. That is, she makes it enticingly offbeat. Instead of ending with a firm, definitive rhyme, each line ends with a sharp, surprising enjambment—the word "we" gets isolated, cut off from the rest of the sentence. As we discuss in our entry on the poem's meter, these enjambments are important to the poem's rhythm: they help Brooks capture the syncopated rhythm of a jazz beat.

The poem's internal rhymes are thus key to its rhythm, the way it takes on the characteristics of jazz. And its rhymes help the poem mimic jazz in another way: like most popular songs, jazz songs tend to rely on rhyme. With its strong, regular rhymes and its pulsing syncopated rhythm, "We Real Cool" thus sounds like a jazz song, its speakers like jazz singers, crooning to the reader.

SPEAKER

As the subtitle to "We Real Cool" announces, the poem is spoken by seven "Pool Players" at the "Golden Shovel," a pool hall. The seven speakers spend the poem describing themselves: what they do and who they are. They are delinquents, they skip school, hang out late, and get in fights. They are fully aware of the costs of their lifestyle, acknowledging in the poem's final line that they will "Die soon." But they are still proud of themselves and the way they live: instead of being ashamed, they "Sing sin." In other words, they praise transgression and bad behavior. The poem is thus ambiguous in its judgment of the speakers: one might read it as a warning about the costs of fast living. Or, one might read it as a celebration of rebellion and youth—the way that the speakers challenge authority and complacency.

SETTING

"We Real Cool" is set in a pool hall called the "Golden Shovel." Over the course of the poem, seven pool players describe their rebellious and delinquent lives. The setting of the poem is thus a little bit seedy: the pool hall is a scene of "sin," a place where people get drunk on cheap "gin," stay up late and get in fights. In interviews, Gwendolyn Brooks has said that the poem was inspired by a real pool hall in her neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago: walking by it one afternoon, she saw some kids hanging out outside of it and began to imagine how they would describe themselves. Although the poem never explicitly links itself to this incident, it is thus fair to imagine it set in a segregated black neighborhood in Chicago during the late 1950s.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Even though it consists of just eight narrow lines, "We Real Cool" has become one of the most famous poems of the 20th century and a centerpiece in Gwendolyn Brooks's towering reputation as a poet. (Brooks even complained about the poem's fame, asking editors to anthologize some of her other poems, instead of constantly reprinting "We Real Cool.")

Despite its monumental reputation, "We Real Cool" was written during a time of change for Brooks. It presents a poet in transition. By the time she published "We Real Cool" in her 1960 collection, *The Bean Eaters*, she was one of the most famous poets in the United States. In 1949, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her epic poem *Annie Allen*, becoming the first black author to do so. She had been publishing with the most prestigious New York publishing companies. However, as the 1960s progressed she gradually turned her back on mainstream publishing—choosing to publish her work with Haki Madhubuti's Chicago-based Third World Press.

This transition marks a broader transition. As she came under the influence of younger poets like Amiri Baraka—and the "Black Arts Movement" that they launched—she wanted to write "poems for black people, about black people," as she noted later—and to publish with black owned and operated publishing houses. She turned her back on mainstream success in order to do so. As she made this transition, "We Real Cool" remained a centerpiece of her repertoire—a poem she would often read for black audiences. The poem thus became a rallying cry for independent, black artistic movement: a celebration of rebellion and self-determination, whatever its

costs.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"We Real Cool" was first published in 1960, at the height of the American Civil Rights movement. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, black Americans lived as second-class citizens: confined to separate and unequal schools and neighborhoods, often denied the right to vote. During the 1950s and 1960s, black Americans led a series of legal and political campaigns to reverse these discriminatory laws and to change American ideas about race, winning victories that changed the fabric of American life.

Though the poem never explicitly acknowledges that its speakers are African American, the poem is usually understood to describe a group of African American teenagers hanging out at a pool hall. In interviews, Brooks has said that she wrote the poem after seeing a group of delinquents hanging out outside a pool hall, the Golden Shovel, in Bronzeville—the segregated black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago where she lived for most of her life.

The rebelliousness of the speakers, their refusal to live within the boundaries of social norms, takes on a different flavor when it is placed in the context of the Civil Rights movement. One might understand the poem as celebrating their rebelliousness, their unwillingness to live within the boundaries set up for them by a racist society. Or one might understand the poem as mourning the tragic shortness of their lives: meditating on the way that black lives are limited and cut short in a racist society.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- What Is Jazz? — The Smithsonian Museum offers a brief history and definition of jazz. (https://americanhistory.si.edu/smithsonian-jazz/education/what-jazz)
- Gwendolyn Brooks Reads "We Real Cool." — The poet reads "We Real Cool" aloud and discusses its meaning. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaVfLwZ6jes)
- Gwendolyn Brooks's Biography — A detailed biography of Brooks from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks)
- "We Real Cool" Animated Video — An animated video from the Poetry Foundation and Manual Cinema imagines how Brooks wrote "We Real Cool." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0USvSvhue70)
- An Interview with Brooks — Gwendolyn Brooks discusses two of her most famous poems with Chicago Public Radio. (https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9560637)

HOW TO CITE

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