



TEST PREP

Test Strategy

Author and Me

The answer is not always directly stated. Think about everything you have read to figure out the best answer.

Gwendolyn Brooks: A Voice

“Every day there’s something exciting or disturbing to write about. With all that’s going on, how could I stop?”

Gwendolyn Brooks never did stop. In her lifetime she witnessed some of the most pivotal events in modern American history and recorded them. Her poetry acted as a clear voice to help guide future generations through trouble and triumph.

The Voice of a Child

Born in 1917 in Topeka, Kansas, Gwendolyn moved with her family to Chicago later that year. She grew up watching her father work as a janitor, knowing that he had wanted to become a doctor but could not afford it. Early on, Gwendolyn knew that he was the kind of person she wanted to write about. She would write about the working man, the caring mother, the forgotten soldier, and the lonely child.

She began to write down her feelings and experiences. She wrote her first poem when she was only seven. When her parents saw how naturally she took to writing, they gave her a writing desk of her own. At the age of 13, Gwendolyn published a poem called “Eventide” in *American Childhood* magazine. Gwendolyn’s voice



continued to rush from her. By 16, she had collected a portfolio of work that included more than seventy-five published poems.

The Voice of a Teenager

“I felt that I had to write,” Gwendolyn once said. “Even if I had never been published, I knew that I would go on writing, enjoying it and experiencing the challenge.” Gwendolyn took a job at the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper that focused on Chicago’s African American community. Newspaper work taught Gwendolyn to view things from the outside, to observe and record the world in order to make sense of it. She saw life as a poem, a sad and wonderful song that took place every day for everyone. In particular, she felt the need to write about African Americans in Chicago, a world that was often overlooked.

Gwendolyn worked hard to learn everything she could about writing. She graduated with a degree in English and attended poetry workshops. Working with other talented young writers, she learned all of the techniques and tools of classic and modern poetry and began to shape her unique poetic voice.

The Voice of the Silent

Gwendolyn’s first collection of poetry was published in 1945. It was called *A Street in Bronzeville*, which was a neighborhood in Chicago. It overflowed with life—real life that was rarely the subject of traditional poetry. Her subject was the African American community, but her voice appealed to everyone. She wrote about “life” as a universal truth, not as an experience to be divided into races, classes, or genders.

A Street in Bronzeville was a huge hit with both critics and audiences, but even Gwendolyn couldn’t have predicted the success to come. Her next book, *Annie Allen* (1949), received even more attention. It was the story of an African American woman’s journey from youth to adulthood. Critics loved it and readers applauded Gwendolyn’s brave portrayal of an African American woman’s experience in American society.

Annie Allen became the first book by an African American writer to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize.



The Voice of Equality

All of those nights at her childhood writing desk had led Gwendolyn Brooks to America's top literary prize, yet she did not stop there. Her voice continued to speak to her.

Now famous and well-respected, Gwendolyn wrote what she felt needed to be written. She examined the changing experiences of African Americans all over the country. She wrote like a reporter, as an outsider looking in. That all changed in 1967, when Gwendolyn attended an African American writer's conference in Tennessee.

There she met young writers who had their own stories, poetry, and opinions. At that time civil rights was a key issue in American politics. Listening to all those writers, Gwendolyn felt a part of the struggle for freedom. The young thinkers and artists inspired her to rediscover her writing and herself.

A Voice for All Time

Gwendolyn Brooks spent her later years using poetry to advance the rights of African Americans in the United States. She knew that people were listening and she never let her voice grow quiet. Gwendolyn won many awards in her final years, but no award compared to her desire to spread the word of poetry to all. It was her gift. It was her voice.

On December 3, 2000, Gwendolyn Brooks died. Her voice fell silent, but her words live on.

Tip

You have to think about the entire selection to choose the best answer.

Directions: Answer the questions.

- 1. What does the author mean by saying Gwendolyn's voice rushed from her?**
 - A She spoke quickly.
 - B She wrote without thinking.
 - C She produced many poems in a short time.
 - D She rushed her ideas, and her poems were all very similar.
- 2. Why did Gwendolyn want to write poetry?**
 - A to get published
 - B to explain her view of the world
 - C that was all she was trained to do
 - D it was the best way to make money quickly
- 3. Why was *Annie Allen* an important book?**
 - A It told about the difficulties of being an African American woman.
 - B It shows that Gwendolyn could write about Asian women.
 - C It brought Gwendolyn a large amount of prize money.
 - D It changed people's opinions about poetry.
- 4. How did Gwendolyn's poetry help African Americans?**
- 5. Gwendolyn Brooks "never let her voice grow quiet." How does her voice speak in her writing? Write two paragraphs and use details from the selection to support your response.**

Writing Prompt

Gwendolyn Brooks is the Author of the Month. Write a news article about her life and the impact she has had on her audience. Your article should be at least three paragraphs long.

