

Out of the Shade and Into the Sun: Teaching Gwendolyn Brooks' "truth"

by Sophie Daws

Education level: Junior High and/or High School

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: 60 minutes

Objectives: Discuss metaphor with students. Discuss the idiom "ignorance is bliss" and Gwendolyn Brooks' nuanced take on ignorance. Demonstrate where politics and art merge, particularly among writers of the Harlem Renaissance and adjacent movements.

Required materials: Print-out of poem or a way to project it on the board, paper and pencils.

Literary model: "truth" by Gwendolyn Brooks

FREEWRITE OR WARM-UP DISCUSSION *5 minutes*

Ask students to answer the following questions individually in free writes, in groups, or as a class.

- Have you ever heard "ignorance is bliss" or "blissfully unaware"? What do you think these phrases mean? Are there any drawbacks to ignorance and unawareness?
- Is there anything in life you want to face? This could be fears as well as your deepest desires.

LITERARY MODEL *5 minutes*

"truth" by Gwendolyn Brooks

Ask students to first read the poem quietly in their heads, then ask students to read the poem popcorn style.

DISCUSSION *15 minutes*

As much as possible, I get the class to lead the discussion, but below are some talking points and comprehension benchmarks you might want them to hit:

- In this poem, what does the sun symbolize? What about shade and the "dear thick

shelter”?

- What do you think the people Brooks’ talks about in this poem are praying for? Why might they flee once their prayers have been answered?
- Now think about your own experience. Why might staying in the shade, though oppressive, feel safer? Why might moving toward the sun be scary but worth it?

PROMPT *15 minutes*

Depending on the direction of the conversation, below are possible prompts. You can also give students the option to choose their favorite.

- Imagine yourself in the scene this poet depicts—you wake one morning to fierce hammering on the door. It is the thing you’ve always wanted. Do you open the door? Do you face your wish-come-true? Why or why not? Tell me what happens next.
- Write a letter to someone you care deeply about and tell them why they should move out of the shade and into the sunshine—acknowledging why it might be scary, but ultimately worth it.

SHARE *5 minutes*

Ask students to share!

EXAMPLES

To Anyone Who’s in the Dark

I know being in the shade feels comfortable,
but me and you both know it really only feels comfortable for a little bit.
When you’re in the darkness for a long period of time it feels worse, colder...

At some point you need to get out of the shade and go into the sunshine
to feel warm and seek the good.

I know it might feel scary going into something you don’t know,
but you never wanna get stuck in the dark,
you gotta push forward.

- Wyatt T., Prescott Lakes Detention Center, Fall 2023

For Mama

I'm the Devil's serpent
But I can't do the devil's work for him, it be
hurting.
Mama told me come out of hiding open the curtains.
I can't make my mind up though, I aint
certain.
Put my thoughts in the ground lay it like
a dream.
When I was smoking gas you know I be
coughing.

Things going on all around me it be
confusing.

Be strong for my mama, can't show
her I'm losing.

Got a little brother and sister at
home.

Gotta win this fight, but I can't do
this alone.

People be calling, I don't answer
the phone.

Buy my mama fancy things, I say "make em yours".

I'll always be there for mama, of course

Will I be home soon? That I can't answer.

Thoughts spinning around my head just like a dancer.

I once had a fine thing she was all
mine.

Then I got locked up doing all this time,
singing all the rhymes.

But I don't wanna be here no more,
picking my heart up off the floor

regret yelling at mama, slamming the door,

now I only see her in visitation

waiting to go home,

I'm being
patient.

- Trystan Y., Prescott Lakes Detention Center, Fall 2023