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Misguided Cool

by Jonathon Drews

(English 1130)

The contemporary poem “We Real Cool,” by Gwendolyn Brooks comments on how gang members have a distorted view of what is cool. The narrator of this poem is one of the seven pool players or gang members who are describing what behaviors make them cool. The author then uses the gang’s self described understanding of cool with the last line to point out how this lifestyle leads to an early death. This poetic technique provides an understanding of how the gang’s perception of cool is in actuality distorted and seriously misguided view of what is socially identified as cool. Through thoroughly examining the technical aspects of this poem one will be able to better deduce what the author is postulating about the gang members and their pernicious lifestyle.

The use of internal and external rhyme within this poem posits how this poem is being sung as a rap by the seven pool players proclaiming their lifestyle. The internal rhyme begins in line one with the word “cool” which rhymes with “school” in line two (Brooks 655). External rhyme is evident in these first two lines as each line ends with “we.” This external rhyme with “we” continues throughout the poem except for the last line where the poem ends with “Die soon” (Brooks 655). Ending each sentence with “we” brings a group mentality to the way in which the narrator describes what cool is. By not ending the last line with “we” the author is pointing how their detrimental behaviors will end their lives soon and after death there is nothing. Throughout this poem the author is commenting on how their description or belief of what is cool is terribly wrong. Internal rhyme continues in line three “late” rhymes internally with the word “straight” in line four (Brooks 655). The word “Sin” in line five rhymes with “gin” in line six, and “jazz” and “June” provide further internal rhyme in lines seven and eight, respectively (Brooks 655). There is also a rhythm to this couplet poem which further supports the ability of this poem to be sung as a rap. The first line of this poem is dactylic while the rest of the poem becomes spondee. The change from dactylic to spondee creates more emphasis on the later lines as these pool players describe why they are real cool, which adds further support for why this poem can be sung as a rap. The understanding that this poem can be sung makes the lifestyle of these pool players or gang members more understood but also allows for the reader to examine the poem as a critique on the destructive lifestyles of these gang members.

Along with the rhythm and rhyme of this poem another technical aspect that is important to examine, so as to better understand what the author is trying to say, is the author’s use of alliteration. In this poem the author uses consonance, which refers to the echoing of consonants in a poem to add a certain tone to the poem, and through inspecting the tone that the author wants one can enhance their understand of the author’s overall meaning. In the first three lines of the poem one will notice the repetition of the “l” sound as in “real” “cool” left” “lurk” “late” and “school” in lines one, two, and three (Brooks 655). This “l” sound is a quick staccato sound, and this short sound exemplifies the lives of these gang members as being short and quick because as the poem tells us they die soon. Consonance provides further understanding of this poem when one notices how the “s” sound in the word “school” reverberates with “strike” “straight” “sing” and “sin” in lines two, four, and five (Brooks 655). This “s” sound creates a hissing sound in the poem, and the hissing reminds us of snakes which are seen as the Devil’s creatures or symbols of evil or death. This sound furthers the point of how the actions of these gang members are evil and will lead to certain death. Therefore, if their actions are evil and result in a quick death how can those actions which are defined by these gang members be considered cool? The gang members or seven pool players have a misconstrued

concept of what is cool. Yet another instance of consonance is with the short “g” or “j” sound can be heard in “gin” “jazz” and “June” in lines six and seven (Brooks 655). This short and quick “g” or “j” sound provides further understanding because it allows us to see the poem as an understanding of their lives how it is short and quick and death is soon to come. The understanding that one is able to acquire from examining the consonance within this poem helps one to better understand the poem, and how the author is attempting to comment on the misconstrued conception that these gang members have of what is cool.

Another important technical aspect of this poem is the diction and how it provides for a literal and a rather different figurative interpretation. The first two lines can be easily comprehended as the narrator is proclaiming why they are real cool and then continues to list the reasons that define cool. In the second line the narrator says that cool is leaving school and this can be easily understood literally. The third line they are cool because they “lurk late” which can be also literally interpreted as cool is staying out late (Brooks 655). In the fourth line the definitions become more figurative. “Strike straight” can mean that they hit the pool ball straight when they play pool, and on a more figurative level it can mean that they “tell it like it is” meaning they do not exaggerate or hide their rough lifestyle (Brooks 655). In line five “sing sin” cannot be interpreted literally (Brooks 655). As such one must examine it figuratively in which it means to proclaim a sinful lifestyle or at least to comment that they enjoy the sinful acts they commit. The sixth line “thin gin” figuratively means to dilute gin the liquor with something to make it taste better (Brooks 655). However, the word “thin” can also be understood as a slang term for cocaine so they can be proclaiming how they like cocaine and gin to escape from the reality of their lives (Jacklyn B.). In the seventh line the phrase “jazz June” can have multiple meanings (Brooks 655). In slang terms jazz means to have sex so this can be understood as the gang members like to have sex with June (Jazzriff). Which is an innocent name therefore combining this will mean that these gang members like to have sex with sweet innocent girls. However, since Jazz was a prominent type of music during the 1950’s when this poem was written this line could mean that they like to listen to Jazz music during the month of June. Yet, this understanding would not fit as well with the rest of the poem because all of the other actions are ruinous behaviors. As such the slang interpretation of this line would seem to be more appropriate for our understanding. The eighth and final line “die soon” implies that these pernicious behaviors which are previously listed will end in a certain early death (Brooks 655). This conclusion suggests that the interpretation of cool by these pool players is wrong because such early death cannot possibly be considered cool.

After analyzing the technical aspects of the poem it is important to notice the two lines before the poem. These lines add further meaning to the poem and support the author’s criticism of the narrator or gang members’ concept of what is cool. The first of these two lines identifies pool players. Pool players generally play pool at a billiards room and pool there almost always involves gambling. This symbolically represents how these gang members are gambling their lives away with their destructive behavior. The next line identifies there being seven of these pool players at a place called the Golden Shovel. This line has multiple hidden meanings. Seven is generally seen as a lucky number however in this instance it is quite the opposite because these pool players are unlucky and will end up dead from the behaviors that they are identifying as cool. Golden Shovel is most likely the name of the player’s billiard room. On a more figurative level it represents how these gang members are going to be digging their graves with the shovel. The shovel is golden because these gang members had great potential to be anything, but instead they decided to throw it all away and waste their talents with their felonious behaviors. Thus the beginning two lines represent and support the author’s position about the gang members and how they are destroying their lives with what they think is cool.

We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS,
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL

We real cool. We	1
Left school. We	2
Lurk late. We	3
Strike straight. We	4
Sing sin. We	5
Thin gin. We	6
Jazz June. We	7
Die soon.	8

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