



## [We Real Cool](#), by Gwendolyn Brooks

### **In A Nutshell**

Gwendolyn Brooks was walking through her Chicago neighborhood one day when she saw something that caught her eye. She looked through the doorway of a pool hall and saw a bunch of guys who looked too young to be there. She was intrigued by what she saw as their combination of boldness and insecurity. On the one hand, they were thumbing their noses at society by hanging out at a place populated by gamblers and pool sharks – on a school day. On the other hand, spending your day in a dingy, dimly lit room seems more like something you'd do to *look* cool, as opposed to actually *being* cool. She decided to write a poem about it. (You can listen to Brooks talk about "We Real Cool" at [Poets.org](http://Poets.org).)

Brooks might not be happy that we're giving yet more attention to this short poem. "I wrote other stuff, you know," she might say – and, in fact, did say at readings where she would nonetheless recite "We Real Cool" with gusto. Though "We Real Cool" is her most famous poem, Brooks wrote other excellent poems like "The Bean Eaters." The next time you're at the library, pick up one of her full collections, even if only to flip through the pages to see how her other poetry *looks*.

"We Real Cool" has become an example of what can be accomplished in a very short space with simple, everyday language. Much like William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," "We Real Cool" is as much about defining the possibilities of poetry as it is about its particular subject matter. Using only a few well-placed words, Brooks recreated the

---

Visit Shmoop for full coverage of [We Real Cool](#)

Shmoop: [study guides](#) and [teaching resources](#) for [literature](#), [US history](#), and [poetry](#)



**Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0**

This document may be modified and republished for noncommercial use only.  
You must attribute Shmoop and link to <http://www.shmoop.com>.

atmosphere of the pool hall and the attitudes of the players. She emphasized sound over description.

Brooks was a Chicago poet, and she lived in the Windy City for most of her life. Chicago is known as a center of the blues and jazz cultures, and even more so when this poem was published in 1960, in the collection *The Bean Eaters*. Now, we don't always think an artist has to be seen through the lens of his or her environment, but in this poem the rhythms of jazz are fairly inescapable, so it's important to mention it.

In 1950, Brooks became the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, which she was awarded for her book *Annie Allen*. She served as the U.S. Poet Laureate from 1985-1986.

*Visit Shmoop for much more analysis:*

- [We Real Cool Themes](#)
- [We Real Cool Quotes](#)
- [We Real Cool Summary](#)
- Also: literary devices, characters, trivia, audio, photos, links, and more

## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Whose voice and opinions come through in the poem? How does Brooks create a persona for the pool players that both sounds like them and sounds like someone criticizing them?
- 2 Why does Brooks put the word "We" at the end of almost every line? What effect does this have on the way you read the poem?
- 3 To what extent do you think your reading of the poem is influenced by stereotypes? Does Brooks acknowledge or undermine these stereotypes in any way?

---

Visit Shmoop for full coverage of [We Real Cool](#)  
Shmoop: [study guides](#) and [teaching resources](#) for [literature](#), [US history](#), and [poetry](#)



Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0

This document may be modified and republished for noncommercial use only.  
You must attribute Shmoop and link to <http://www.shmoop.com>.

Visit Shmoop for many more [We Real Cool Study Questions](#)

---

Visit Shmoop for full coverage of [We Real Cool](#)  
Shmoop: [study guides](#) and [teaching resources](#) for [literature](#), [US history](#), and [poetry](#)



**Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0**

This document may be modified and republished for noncommercial use only.  
You must attribute Shmoop and link to <http://www.shmoop.com>.