“We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks

**Theme**

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| **Language, Music, and the Vernacular Tradition in African American Poetry** |

**Standards**

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| **Common Core*** Literature 2) Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
* Literature 3) Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
* Literature 4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.
* Craft and Structure 4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
* Knowledge and Ideas 4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.
* Types and Purposes e) Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.
* Production and Distribution of Writing 4) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**Standards of Learning for Virginia*** 9.4.d) Compare and contrast the use of rhyme, rhythm, sound, imagery, and other literary devices to convey a message and elicit the reader’s emotion.
* 9.4.f) Explain the relationship between the author’s style and literary effect.
* 10.4.i) Evaluate how an author’s specific word choices, syntax, tone, and voice shape the intended meaning of the text.
* 10.4.k) Compare and contrast how literary devices convey a message and elicit a reader’s emotions.
* 11.4.d) Interpret the social or cultural function of American literature.
* 11.4.g) Interpret how the sound and imagery of poetry support the subject, mood, and theme, and appeal to the reader’s senses.
* 12.4.h) Use critical thinking to generate and respond logically to literal, inferential, and evaluative questions about the text(s).
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**Lesson Body and Sequence:**

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| **STUDENT WILL DO** | **TEACHER WILL DO** |
| **Background Information** |
| Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) was an extremely influential and honored poet. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for *Annie Allen*, becoming the first Black writer to win the award. She went on to become the Poet Laureate of Illinois in 1968. Brooks has won numerous awards and has authored more than twenty books. In 1994, Brooks was named the Jefferson Lecturer by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The 1994 Furious Flower Conference was dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks, taking its name from a line in one of her poems “The Sermon on the Warpland.” At the Furious Flower Gwendolyn Brooks Tribute, Brook’s read, “We Real Cool,” describing seven young men that she saw skipping school at a pool hall. As you watch the video, think about Brooks’ enunciation as she reads the poem. | Introduce Brooks, her achievements, and her importance in African American poetry. Explain the origin of the Furious Flower Poetry Center and Brooks’ importance in the center. |
| **Reader Response Questions** |
| 1. What do you and your friends do for fun?
 | These questions are designed to help students begin to think about the issues that will be discussed further in the lesson. |
| 1. If you could skip school for a day, where would you go to hang out with your friends? What would you do?
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| 1. If your teachers could leave school to find you, where would they go? Explain.
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| **History and Culture** |
| 1. “We Real Cool” incorporates elements of jazz music. Jazz was most popular in the 1920s and 1930s, while this poem was written in 1959. Why do you think Brooks used jazz instead of following the musical style of the day? What does this say about influences on poetry? Explain.
 | Briefly explain the characteristics of jazz music. |
| 1. In a conversation with B. Denise Hawkins, Brooks, when talking about her poems, said that, “They need to know that I am interested in what goes on in the streets, that my *own* home on 74th and Evans was invaded…” Do you think it’s important to comment on what’s happening in your own community? Describe a situation or event that you have observed and want to write about? Explain.
 | Introduce B. Denise Hawkins and discuss the interview. Highlight anything else that you find to be of importance for the lesson. |
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| **Poet’s Craft and Structure** |
| 1. Enjambment is the lack of punctuation at the end of a line, causing the lines to bleed together. In this poem, Brooks says, “We real cool. We / Left school.,” and she continues this throughout the poem’s entirety. How does this enjambment affect the way you read the poem? Do you find yourself flowing into the next line or are you pausing? Explain how this affects your experience while reading the poem.
 | Review enjambment. |
| 1. The enjambment of this poem is similar to the style of jazz improvisation. Read the poem out loud to yourself. How did you read it? Now listen to Gwendolyn Brooks read it. How does she read it? What words does she enunciate? How is this different from your reading? Explain.
 | Go over how enunciation can affect someone’s reading and understanding of a poem. |
| 1. Internal rhyme is a rhyme that happens in the middle of a line as opposed to the end. How does the placement of the rhymes in this poem affect your understanding? Why do you think Brooks chooses to rhyme in the middle as opposed to the end?
 | Review internal rhyme. |
| 1. Brooks uses internal rhyme and she also uses alliteration (the repetitive consonant sounds at the beginning of words). How does figurative language including sound devices such as the rhythm and rhyme scheme support the subject, mood, theme, and appeal to the reader’s senses? Do you think the meaning would change if the rhyme and alliteration were changed?
 | Review figurative language, subject, mood, and theme.  |
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| **Reading and Writing Connections** |
| 1. In the style of “We Real Cool,” write an eight-line poem about what you and your friends do for fun. Title your poem. | These Reading/Writing Connections are designed to encourage student choice and acts as the formative assessment for the lesson. Students should be able to utilize skills and concepts discussed in the lesson to complete either of the connections. |
| 2. Take Brooks’ images and rework them into a one-page story. How would you imagine their story? |

**Materials**

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| * Printed copy of poem (optional)
* Computer or tablet
* Paper/Pencil (optional—teachers may decide to have students complete all activities on their computer or tablet)
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