We Real Cool: Poem Structure And Symbolism

There are several mysteries shrouded within the confines of this poem. For instance, Brooks illustrates that there are seven individuals in the group when she writes “Seven at the Golden Shovel”. (Brooks, line 2) This line helps to identify how many individuals could potentially be in the poem. Brooks never mentions any race of individuals within the group. A quote from, “Critical Essay on “We Real Cool' states, “These pool players, while almost always thought to be black males--perhaps because the poet is black and it is boys who usually hang out in pool parlors--could be white males or even females”. (Joe Sarnowski, 31-33) This quote shows the potential races that could be in this group. The behavior of the individuals also plays a part in identifying them. This is the only clue Brooks provides to identify the group, these lines taken from the poem “We Left School / We Lurk Late”(Brooks, line 3-4) shows the rebellious nature of these individuals. The lack of detail of the group illustrates the idea “Brooks” was trying to create, where the group is up to the reader's understanding. Similarly, culture plays a role in Brooks's poem as well. Brooks's father was a janitor and her mother was a pianist. It was in Chicago that Brooks got her bearings for rhythm and blues this influence eventually spilled into her writing and is present in a lot of her works. Being African American Brooks saw her fair share of discrimination, for example, a quote from “Gwendolyn Brooks Biography”, states “Brooks attended three high schools: the prestigious, integrated Hyde Park High School; the all-black Wendell Phillips Academy High School; and the integrated Englewood High School. The racial prejudice that she encountered at some of these institutions would shape her understanding of social dynamics in the United States and influence her writing.” (Biography.com Editors) Because of Brooks' s upbringing, African American culture plays a significant role in her poem. Brooks shows her experiences and culture through her imaginative and unique poem structure, her amazing use of alliteration, and her excellent use of rhythm in the poem.

“We Real Cool” has a very unique poem structure. Where the poem lacks in words, it makes up for it in meaning. Carpe diem translated means to seize the day, this statement sums up the message brooks wanted to communicate to readers through the young individuals in the poem. Throughout the poem, Brooks shows the young individual's unwillingness to follow the dominant culture in society. Brooks brilliantly reveals us this time and time again in the poem; for example, when she writes “We Jazz June”(Brooks, line 9) this could be construed as Brooks showing that the young adults are celebrating June living happily. Joe Sarnowski writes “When reading from this point of view, the meaning of 'Jazz June' is not likely to refer to something as stark as rape; rather, as D. H. Melhem contends in Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice, the 'usage pertains to 'having fun.' And when we consider together all of these phrases made by the seven, it is this idea of 'having fun' that comes to mind.” (Sarnowski) Brooks displays a lot of the group's choices, showcasing their freedom from society’s rule. Equally Important as Carpe diem is a person’s world views.

World views play a significant role in this poem, It is because of world views that people can interpret this poem in many different ways. Brooks writing this poem in the late 1950s showed her world views through various means in the poem. Someone reading this poem from an opposite viewpoint of Brooks might not understand her point of view; instead they might create their point of view deriving from their world views, changing the meaning of the poem entirely.

The characters in the poem display their non-interest for a normal life. The group is constantly getting into trouble showing their lack of care for authority. Although freedom is important to have too much if it might end up being detrimental.

One could argue that too much freedom can be detrimental to society. The world is ruled by order, too much freedom could cause chaos. Order is necessary for humans to function, the poem does a good job of displaying what could happen if there is no order. This is shown through the character's actions when they decide to stay up late to thin gin. (Brooks, line 8) Brooks wrote “We Real Cool” around the same time the American civil rights movement was taking place, because of this many speculate that Brooks could have written this poem for the younger black generation, to serve as a warning of what could happen to you if you deviate from the path society wants you to follow.

Spectacularly, Brooks shows many examples of symbolism throughout this poem, but none are more promenade than the symbol of death she uses ironically at the end of her poem. Brooks ends the poem in the last stanza by saying “We Die Soon”. (Brooks, line 10) This stanza has powerful meaning throughout the poem, it shows that not only has the poem come to a halt, but perhaps the group may have also perished. Joe Sarnowski says “With this notion of 'having fun' as the prime concern of the counterculture, it is difficult to read the final sentence, 'We / Die soon,' as being a tragic declaration (as the dominant culture does). Instead, the seven seem to say that life is too short: that we all die too soon, so why not enjoy life while one has it.”. (Sarnowski) This quote explains that the group's death served as a metaphor to understand that life is short and that one must make the most out of life before it is too late. Ultimately, Brooks portrays the group in a rebellious manner to communicate a message to the reader that life is intended to be traveled freely, and that you will inevitably die.