# The Love Song of Satin-Legs Smith: Gwendolyn Brooks Revisits Prufrock's Hell

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**Article excerpt**

Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" (1944) alludes unobtrusively throughout to T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), which in turn refers both explicitly and implicitly to Dante's Inferno (1321). Together, Eliot's and Brooks's poems form a double-layered trajectory pointing back to a common fourteenth-century source, offering two distinctly different Modern revisions of its assumptions.[1] In their recasting of the Inferno, Eliot and Brooks locate hell on earth, in human social environments where their fictive characters are permanent residents; it is readers, rather than protagonists, who are taken on illuminating guided tours. Both poems provide stinging critiques of twentieth-century civilization, with its manifest social, ethical, and spiritual problems. Just as Eliot's depiction of Prufrock and his environment derives ironic impact from allusion to the Inferno, Brooks's portrait of Smith depends for similar effect upon covert comparison with Eliot's.

Brooks's familiarity with Eliot's poetry is well established. She mentions first reading his work at age sixteen, and she expresses special regard for "Prufrock" (Report 173): "I do like, for instance, Eliot's 'Prufrock,' and The Waste Land, 'Portrait of a Lady,' and some others of those earlier poems" (Report 156). Readers have discussed Eliot's influence on diction, phrasing, imagery, tone, theme, and narrative posture in a number of the poems in her first book, A Street in Bronzeville, the collection in which "Satin-Legs" first appeared (Kent, A Life 140; Melhem, Brooks 29-30, 49; Smith 43-50). Specific parallels between "Satin-Legs" and "Prufrock" have been recognized, moreover, although they have not generated extensive comment. D. H. Melhem, for example, observes that Brooks's poem approximates Eliot's in length, that it "similarly deals with an antiheroic vision," and that its aims reinforce Eliot's while at the same time raising others: "Eliot would improve us socially and spiritually. Brooks, no less concerned, probes social ills at their roots in poverty and discrimination" (Brooks 34). Gary Smith notes intriguing contrasts in self-image and personal style between Prufrock and Brooks's protagonist; he suggests that "Satin-Legs" (along with two other well known poems in the Bronzeville collection) offers "parodic challenges to T. S. Eliot's dispirited anti-hero" (46). This understanding of "Satin-Legs" is briefly underscored by Ann Stanford (169). Brooks's allusion is sufficiently elaborate, however, to require more detailed investigation than it has yet received if the relationship between the two poems is to be appreciated fully.

Formally, Brooks's poem models itself on Eliot's to a considerable degree . Total length is equivalent-Brooks's 153 lines measured against Eliot's 131. Both poems are divided into unequal, non-schematically arranged sections, ranging from short, two-line bits to longer chunks of twenty lines or more. Both rely heavily on rhyme, favoring couplets but committed to casual or accidental placement rather than to any definite scheme. Brooks's poem shows more instances of internal rhyme, and Eliot's more examples of repeated lines and phrases. Both poems tend strongly toward an iambic rhythm, but except in her short epilogue Brooks sticks faithfully to a pentameter line-"a well-mastered, fluid blank verse" (Kent, A Life 70)-while Eliot swings easily from three-foot to five- and even six- or seven-foot lines. Diction in both cases is demanding, often Latinate; these poems achieve eloquence with rich vocabulary and sometimes elaborate syntax. They are peppered with high cultural references and allusions. Prosodical and rhetorical choices in both poems combine to create an unusual balance between gravity and elegance, on the one hand, wryness and wit on the other.

The titles of the poems serve as perhaps their most obvious point of formal similarity. Rhythmically, both consist of an iamb followed by two anapests (Eliot's including a final unstressed syllable, or feminine ending):