The road on fire or the icy road:
An analysis of “Sadie and Maud” by Gwendolyn Brooks

The tale of Goldilocks and the three bears is told from word of mouth to almost all generations of children through different renditions. I have even heard it told throughout elementary school. The story is about a family of bears who leaves their home for a while to go out on a walk as they wait for their porridge to cool. Goldilocks intrudes into the three bears’ home by tasting their soup, sitting in their chairs, and lying in their beds. As she does this, she judges all the different items as too much of something, too little, or just right. Goldilocks preferred the soup that was warm rather than the soup that was too hot. Who would have thought that the moral of a story you heard when you were five could possibly pertain to the life you are living now? The moral of this story explains what is going on in Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “Sadie and Maud.” Just as Goldilocks claimed that the chair was too big and one was too small, Brooks has done the same throughout her poem. Gwendolyn Brooks has claimed that the two lifestyles pursued by Sadie and Maud are lives that are extreme ways of living; with this poem, Brooks provides an interesting solution to people who live life to the extreme.

To begin with, the first character, Maud, is a representation of a lifestyle that Brooks viewed to be an extreme way of living. Maud was a female who pursued a higher education as stated in the first stanza, “Maud went to college”(Brooks 1). The way that this statement is read almost makes it seem as if it is a very blunt statement that Brooks was just dying to say about the
majority of people who attend college. College should sound exciting and is highly regarded in today’s society, but Brooks portrays it in a way that sounds just the opposite. It seems that Brooks is stating now that Maud has decided to go to college, so what else is interesting about her? It is as if college has determined what she will experience, where she will live and so on. In fact, this is one of two statements that she makes about Maud throughout the entire poem.

The second statement in the conclusion of the poem is restating that Maud went to college, “Maud, Who went to college”(Brooks 17). Brooks uses a dry tone in this statement to make Maud sound like a complete fool for attending college; she is restating this fact over to let the reader know that Maud is just one of the millions of students who attend college because society says it is good to further your education. Brooks goes on to say Maud ends up alone and that her quality of life is rather low. This statement about Maud is made in the last stanza, “Is a thin brown mouse. She is living all alone. In this old house” (Brooks 18-20). Why doesn’t Brooks make Maud a happy character? Brooks is essentially saying for Maud to search for self-discovery, and this statement is suggested by John Seven and Jana Christy as well in their article when they say, “Don’t look like everybody else!” (Seven and Christy). The reason is because, in reality, Brooks believes that because Maud does everything by society’s standards, she demonstrates an extreme and unbalanced way to live life, and Brooks is persuading the reader not to take that path.

In addition to the first extreme way of living life, Brooks views the character Sadie as a representation of a lifestyle that is another extreme for a person to live life. Unlike Maud, Sadie’s description of life has a lot more details given. Sadie is a girl who does not attend college, and, instead, she decided to stay home, as stated in the second line of the first stanza, “Sadie stayed at home”(Brooks 2). Brooks goes on to say that Sadie got more out of life in the following lines,
“Sadie scraped life with a fine-tooth comb. She didn’t have a tangle in. Her comb found every strand. Sadie was one of the livingest chips in all the land” (Brooks 3-8). Brooks is throwing in a sly statement that this lifestyle is actually living in comparison to Maud’s lifestyle that did not receive many details throughout the entire poem. Just as you start to believe that Brooks prefers Sadie’s life style, she states the negative aspects to Sadie’s living conditions and shows that it is indeed an extreme way of living.

Brooks describes in the poem how when Sadie had two children her parents and Maud rejected her because of the lifestyle that Sadie pursued, “Sadie bore two babies under her maiden name/ Maud and Ma and Papa Nearly died of shame” (Brooks 11). Then Brooks describes how Sadie’s extreme living condition negatively affected her children, “Her girls struck out from home. (Sadie had left as heritage her fine tooth comb)” (Brooks 14). Brooks is stating here that her children bare the memory of what a hard life she lived, and that final thought is not a pleasant memory to have of someone. What seems to be the preferred lifestyle ends up being the opposite to Maud’s road, but the path of living life with low standards is still a path of extreme living according to Brooks; This low standard of achievement that Sadie has is explained in the article “The Small-Area Hypothesis: Effects of Progress Monitoring on Goal Adherence,” “Individuals with good intentions often fail to invest time, effort, or monetary resources required to bring their goals to completion” (Koo and Fishbach). In this poem, it seems like there is almost no proper way of living, that is, until the reader compares it to the moral behind the Goldilocks and the three bears.

The moral behind Goldilocks and the three Bears helps to clarify the solution provided by Gwendolyn Brooks in “Sadie and Maud.” The solution that Brooks provides to the reader is that there should always be a medium to live life by. She uses Maud as a representation of people
who live life by rules and do everything they are told to do, and these types of individuals will end up unhappy and alone in the end because they never pursued happiness. Brooks uses Sadie to show how a person cannot live life being sheltered or else they will suffer in the end because they will fall short of their potential. She is ultimately explaining to the reader that one’s life must consist of balance and not too much of one particular element; even Sue Caton believes in the practice of moderation to attain a healthy lifestyle, “The idea of moderation was raised, along with barriers and facilitators to engaging in a healthy lifestyle” (Caton et al.). A perfect life is hard to pursue, but the only way to get close to it is by bringing variety into one’s life. Life should be like the perfect soup that is described by Goldilocks in the old tale, not too cold, not too hot, but just right.

In conclusion, in Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Sadie and Maud,” she has created two characters as representations of the opposite lives taken down opposite extreme paths. One path shown by the character Maud is that following rules to the point a person no longer makes their own decisions is an extreme way to live. Secondly, Sadie is a representation for people who live a very sheltered lifestyle, and her not living up to her true potential is an extreme way of living as well. This take on the two lifestyles triggers a memory in the minds of the readers that there is no such thing as a perfect lifestyle, but a well-balanced lifestyle is the greatest feat one can achieve in their life time.
Works Cited


