



Jackie Kay's Representation of 'The Broons': Scotland's Happy Family

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# Jackie Kay's Representation of 'The Broons': Scotland's Happy Family

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the contemporary Scottish poet Jackie Kay and the comic strip 'The Broons' by studying Jackie Kay's representation of this family in contrast to its characterisation in the comic strip.<sup>1</sup> This study presents a brief introduction to Jackie Kay and 'The Broons' and pays attention to Kay's referential portrayal of this Scottish family in five of her poems: 'Maw Broon Visits a Therapist' (2006a, p.46-47), 'Paw Broon on the Starr Report' (2006a, p.57), 'The Broon's Bairn's Black' (2006a, p.61), 'There's Trouble for Maw Broon' (2005, p.13-14) and 'Maw Broon goes for colonic irrigation' (unpublished).<sup>2</sup> Each of the poems will be approached stylistically by using the advantages offered by corpus linguistics methodology; in particular, the program *Wordsmith Tools 3.0*. (Scott 1999) will help to show the collocation of certain words through concordances.

## 2. Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay is a Scottish writer, born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father. She was adopted by a white couple at birth and brought up in Glasgow. She studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and she studied English at

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: I would like to thank D.C. Thomson & Co. for allowing me to use 'The Broons' illustrations in this paper and sending me some comic strips, as well as Joyce Gunn Cairns for allowing me to use the illustration of her painting 'Jackie Kay, Poet Extraordinaire'.

<sup>2</sup> The unpublished 'Maw Broon goes for colonic irrigation' was read by Jackie Kay during the conference 'Reading after Empire: Local, Global and Diaspora Audiences' (Stirling University, 3-5 September 2008).

Stirling University. In 2006 she was awarded an MBE in recognition for her services to literature.



**Figure 1.** Jackie Kay Poet Extraordinaire. Joyce Gunn Cairns

A great part of Jackie Kay's poetic production deals with the notion of identity, and gender, sexuality, origin, race, and nationality play a central role in her work. Her poetic works include, among others: *The Adoption Papers* (Kay 2005a); *Other Lovers* (Kay 2001); *Off Colour* (Kay 2006a); *The Frog Who Dreamed She was an Opera Singer* (Kay 1998a); *Life Mask* (Kay 2005b); *Darling: New & Selected Poems* (Kay 2007a); *Red, Cherry Red* (Kay 2007b); and *Lamplight* (To be published). She has also written in other literary modes: prose fiction, *Trumpet* (Kay 1998b); short story collection, *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (Kay 2002a) and *Wish I Was Here* (Kay 2006b); and drama, *Take Away* (Kay 2002b).

Kay's work is strongly influenced and highlighted by the Scottish literary tradition; in particular, two characteristics in Kay's production are perceived. Firstly, Jackie Kay both represents and performs poetry through varying poetic voices:

I loved that poetry could be performed, that poetry could be dramatic. I really do see myself as being part of

a tradition that wants to see the drama that is in poetry, through its poetic voices. (Severin 2002, n.p.)

Secondly, the poet juxtaposes seriousness and wit. The language and the union of a humorous and dramatic tone are features that distinguish Scottish poetry from English, according to Scottish poet Edwin Morgan:

In England, you write in English and that's it. In Scotland you have not only English but various kinds of Scots, and Gaelic [...] Also [...] Scottish poets have much more interest in comedy in poetry and believe that comedy can be used seriously. (Cambridge 1997, p.41)

Finally, popular socio-cultural references are frequent in Kay's poetry, as evidenced here by her portrayal of the 'The Broons' family.

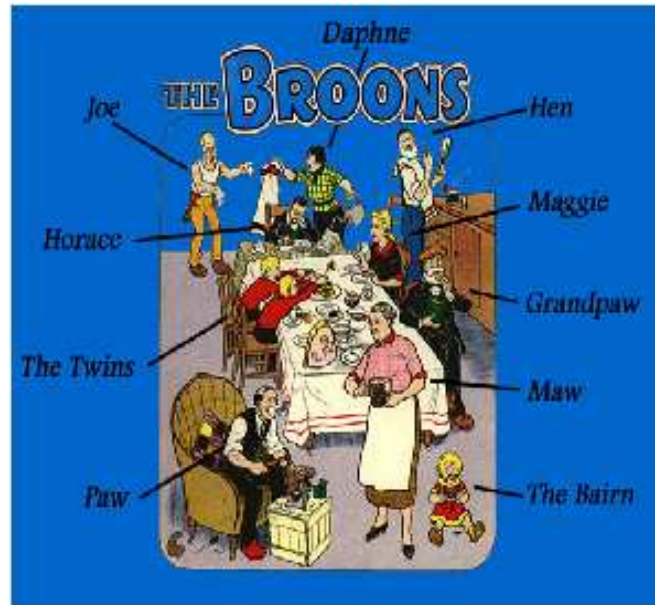
### 3. 'The Broons'



**Figure 2.** Illustration obtained from 'The Broons' webpage. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., LTD Dundee Scotland

'The Broons' is a weekly comic strip, created in 1936 by Dudley Dexter Watkins, and published weekly in *The Sunday Post*, a popular Scottish Sunday newspaper. The only time the Scottish population was not able to read their favourite Sunday comic was due to paper shortages during a period of the Second World War. Moreover, an annual of 'The Broons', which collects the different comic strips, is published every two years, alternating with the bi-annual publication of similar collections of 'Oor Wullie,' a parallel D.D. Watkins comic strip, also published weekly in *The Sunday Post* next to 'The Broons'. These comics deserve more study as part of popular culture since Scots have read them for over seventy years, spanning multiple generations. In this way, 'The Broons' have become part of Scotland's collective community and will probably continue to live amongst future generations. This illustration (fig. 2) of 'The Broons,' used as the front page of the 1949 annual (with its caption 'Scotland's Happy Family that makes every family happy'), confirms both the 'Scottishness' of this comic and its social impact, to which this paper will later return.

The family's surname, 'Broom', is the Scottish pronunciation of the surname 'Brown'; however, they are always referred to as 'The Broons' within the comic. In the same way, the mother, father and little child of the family are called 'Maw', 'Paw' and 'Bairn' respectively, again using Scots. These Scots words establish a strong relationship between this family and Scotland. Likewise, Jackie Kay also uses words such as 'Broons', 'Maw', or 'Paw' to refer to them.



**Figure 3.** Illustration obtained from ‘The Broons’ webpage. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Scotland

The members of the family are Maw and Paw — the parents; Granpaw — the grandfather; Hen and Joe — the two elder brothers; Horace — a very studious boy; Daphne and Maggie — the elder sisters; the Twins and the Bairn. The stereotyping and variety of characters enables different kinds of readers to identify with certain characters. For instance, readers might feel closer to Daphne who is brunette and chubby and is always unsuccessfully trying to diet and has problems finding a date, than to Maggie who is blonde and slim and characterised by her beauty. Other examples of stereotyping of opposites are found in such characterisations as Hen and Joe: Hen is lanky, awkward and unfit, whereas Joe is muscular, handsome and athletic. Similarly, the Twins are archetypal adolescent boys, constantly playing pranks. In contrast Horace is always reading and studying.

Three aspects of ‘The Broons’ context should be highlighted, as surmised in the comic caption mentioned previously: ‘Scotland’s Happy Family That Makes Every Family Happy’. Firstly, ‘The Broons’ are a Scottish family; secondly, ‘The Broons’ influence

Scottish society so as to make every family happy; and finally, ‘The Broons’ are a traditional family characterised by their union and happiness.

### **3.1. A Scottish Family**

The ‘Scottishness’ of this family can be perceived in their diet, their Scottish spirit, and their traditions. ‘The Broons’ follow a traditional Scottish diet shown in many cartoons as well as within the books *Maw Broon’s Cookbook* (D.C. Thomson 2007) and *Maw Broon’s But An’ Ben Cookbook* (D.C. Thomson 2008a). As an illustration, *Maw Broon’s Cookbook* includes recipes such as ‘stovies’, ‘porridge’, ‘breakfast [...] by Hen Broon’, or ‘orange marmalade’, among others. This book of recipes, which represents the passing of customs from one generation to the next, belonged to Maw’s mother, and it was given to Maw when she married Paw. It also includes recipes from friends and clippings that Maw has collected from *The Sunday Post* or from cartons of flour (*Books from Scotland* website). This book places the mother at the centre of the family, as cook and housewife.

The family is proud of representing their Scottish culture. In the following comic, ‘The Broons’ travel to Blackpool, where they meet an English family who shares their surname, ‘Brown’, as well as the number of family members. At first, each member of the family quarrels to defend their cultural tradition. Horace believes in Scotland’s superiority in regards to football, scenery, engineering, and poets like Burns; in contrast, the other boy defends Shakespeare, for example. Other family members and their corresponding figure argue similarly, as seen in the strip.



Figure 4. D.C. Thomson 2008b, p.15. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Scotland

Nevertheless, this conflict between the two families is solved amicably when Paw suggests to the 'Brown' father that they play a football match. This solution brings a moral and humorous tone to the comic strip. The identification and union amongst Scottish people is revealed when the Forfar referee proclaims his fellow countrymen the winners. The time is up and there is no score; therefore, the referee decides the winner on class and sides with the Scots. The mothers, the sensible figure in each of the two families,



discuss the kind of food they give their children and are the only ones who, instead of playing, remain outside encouraging their team.

‘The Broons’ is also representative of Scottish traditions. In these illustrations, they can be seen celebrating Easter at their but n’ ben, rolling eggs down the mountain, or talking about ‘Hogmanay’— Hen and Joe are perfect first-footers since Hen is tall and has brown hair and Joe is handsome.



**Figure 5.** D.C. Thomson 1975. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Scotland



**Figure 6.** Illustration obtained from <http://www.new-year.co.uk/thebroons.html>. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Scotland

### 3.2. ‘That makes every family happy’

‘The Broons’ present a strong familial and cultural influence on Scottish society, which is emphasised in the words ‘that makes every

family happy’: firstly, the use of this strip by the Fire and Rescue Service of Strathclyde in fire safety education; secondly, ‘The Broons’ celebration of the end of the Second World War and the country’s victory; and finally, some nutritionists’ alarmed response to the publication of *Maw Broon’s Cookbook* (D.C. Thomson 2007).

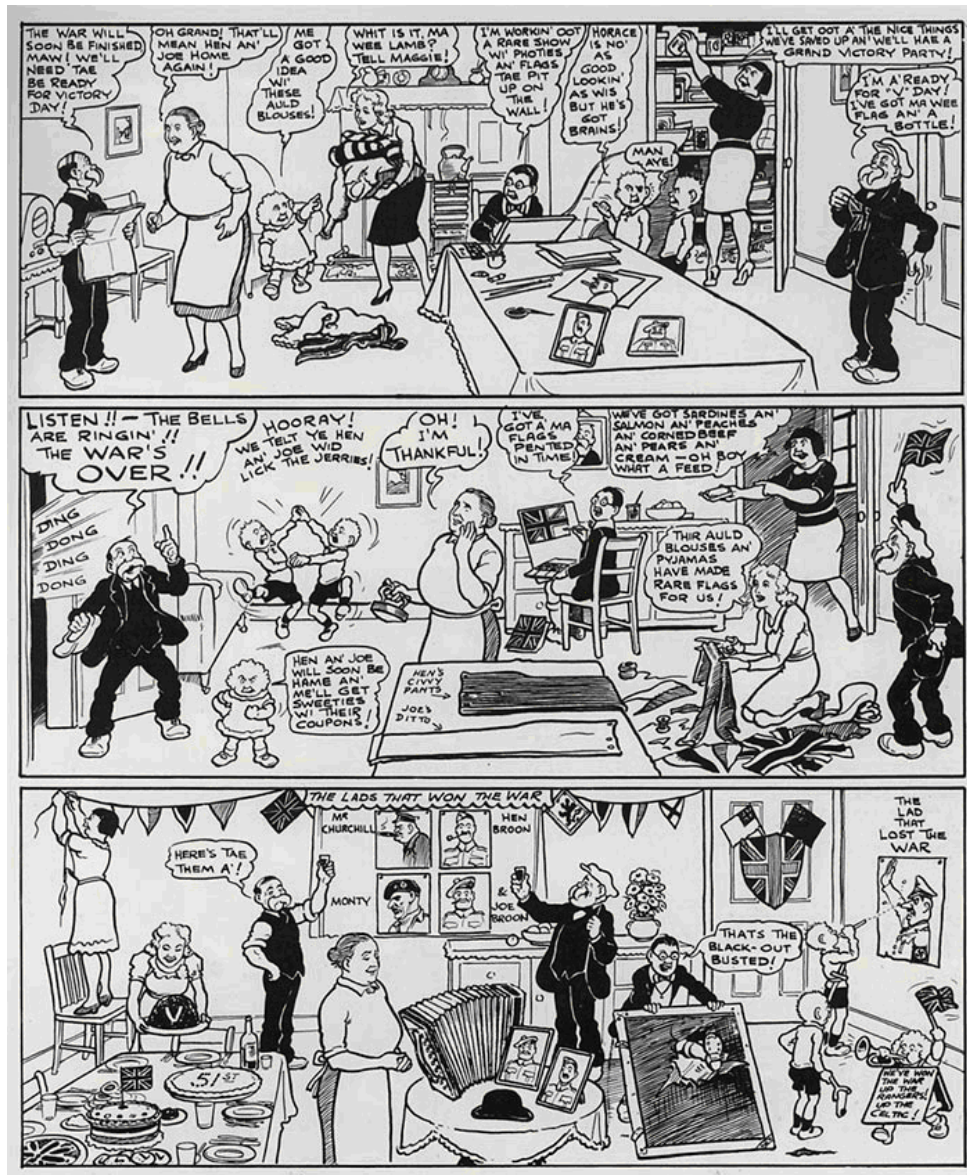
‘Strathclyde Fire & Rescue’, which is the second largest Fire and Rescue Service in the United Kingdom, uses ‘The Broons’ and ‘Oor Wullie’ to illustrate the behavioural models which should be followed to avoid fires. For instance, to explain that fire alarms should be placed on the ceiling, and not on the walls, they use the following comic strip:



**Figure 7.** Illustration obtained from <http://www.strathclydefire.org/cs/bowIntro.asp>. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Scotland

In this comic, none of the men in the family knows how to reach the fire alarm before heading to the football match since Maw is always the one to do it. It is the smallest child, the Bairn, who explains to them how to reach it.

The comic strip ‘The war’s over’ shows the way in which ‘The Broons’ form part of Scottish society, supporting and enhancing the spirit of a Scottish population. Published in *The Sunday Post* on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1945, this comic strip shows that the two elder brothers in the family, Hen and Joe, are serving their nation during the Second World War.



**Figure 8.** Illustration obtained from 'The Broons' webpage. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Scotland

This comic represents the moment in which the family becomes aware that the war is over, as the ringing bells signal. All the family together celebrates victory — 'Victory day' or 'V day' — and the arrival back home of their two elder sons. To celebrate it they create banners out of old shirts, construct a poster, and enjoy all the nice food that they had probably reserved and stored out of fear of food rationing during the war period — sardines, salmon, peaches, corned beef, pears and cream. The last frame includes direct historical and contextual references to the Second World War. Firstly, in a poster

titled 'The Lads that Won the War', there is an illustration of Hen and Joe together with a picture of Mr. Churchill and Monty (Second World War English General Bernard Montgomery's nickname). Secondly, Horace, the most studious brother, refers to the end of 'black-outs'.

The controversial debate which arose after the 2007 publication of *Maw Broon's Cookbook* (D.C. Thomson 2007) is another example of the comic's influence and social impact. Contemporary nutritionists criticize this book since 'The Broons' diet, which is presented as being traditionally Scottish, can lead to obesity, as it includes fried meals, greasy food and too much sweetened food.

### **3.3. A Traditional Family**

The characters in the comic strip remain the same despite the passing of time since they form part of a tradition which their successive strip cartoonists have respected. Peter Davidson, present cartoonist and childhood friend of Watkin's son, highlights the comic's representation of a tradition, as Gilchrist examines:

The present incumbent, the freelance Peter Davidson, is well aware of the iconic nature of the strips he has drawn weekly since 1995: "I don't see it as my job to impose my style on these beloved characters. But, as a commercial artist, I've done many things, so while I'm aware of the importance of keeping the tradition going, let's just say it's an interesting job". (Gilchrist 2006)

Another example of the comic's adherence to tradition is the public negative reaction towards the colour printing of 'Oor Wullie' and 'The Broons' by D.C. Thomson in 1992. The comic returned to its original colour, black and white, after a few months, as a result of its readers' complaints. Following this idea of tradition retention, the

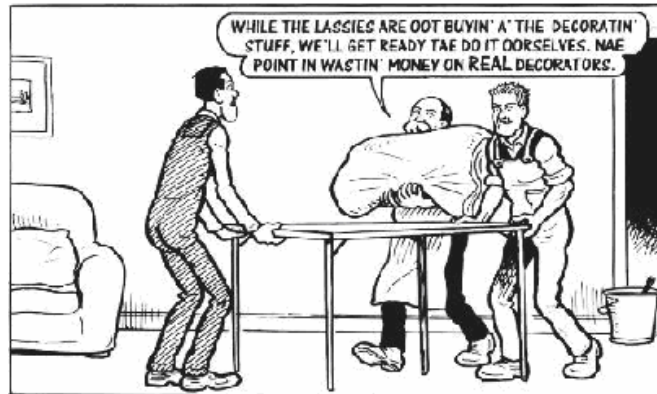
comic strip is always presented in regular squares and in regular series. This distribution contrasts with other more experimental comics.



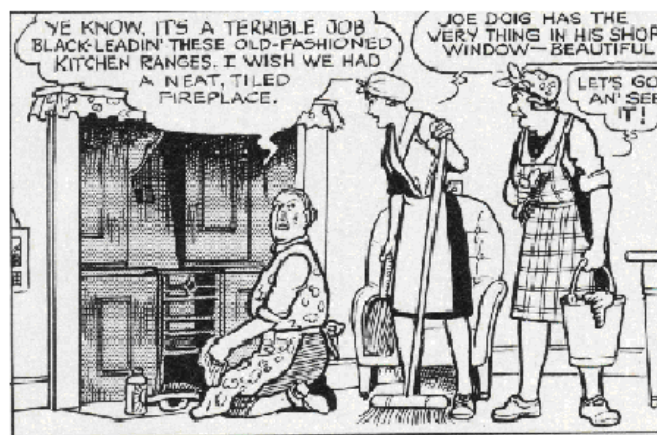
**Figure 9.** D.C. Thomson 1975. *The Broons* © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Scotland

The comic strip arose in 1936 within *The Sunday Post*, a paper which is still considered to be conservative. During war time, ‘The Broons’ represented a humble, traditional and large family living happily together in a tenement, and this was aimed at raising the Scottish population’s spirit during this difficult period. Also, Paw most certainly belongs to a respectable working class. Finally, this family can be valued as traditional if we consider issues such as the division of roles, their characterisation and their union. This is a traditional family in which women and men’s roles are clearly divided. In figure 9 we notice that Paw is reading the newspaper while Maw is knitting. Hen is reading a book, and Joe is completing some football pools while Maggie is doing her nails and Daphne is reading a romance magazine. Finally, one of the Twins is playing with his toy car; however, the Bairn is playing with her doll. The following pictures (figs. 9, 10) show the same division in regard to

house tasks: women do the cleaning whereas men do the harder physical work which involves strength.

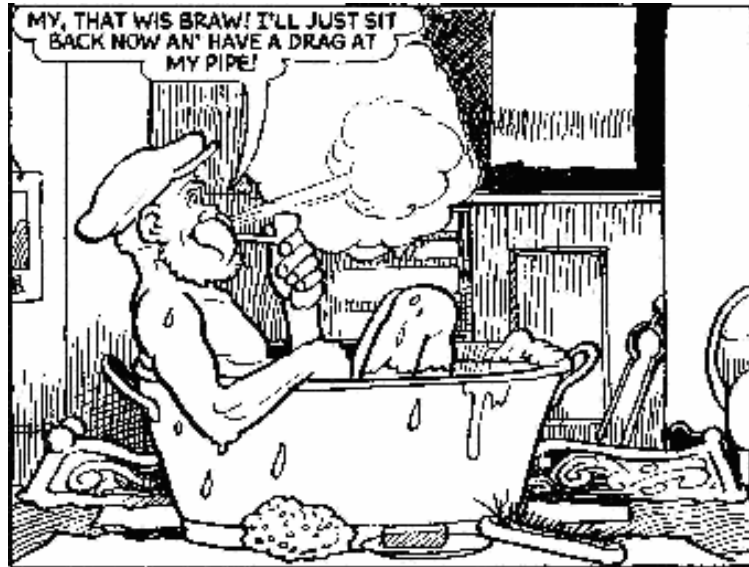


**Figure 10.** D.C. Thomson 2008b. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., LTD Dundee Scotland



**Figure 11.** D.C. Thomson 1975. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

In the same comparative way, there are many images in which either Granpaw or Paw are smoking; however, Maw never smokes:



**Figure 12.** D.C. Thomson 2008b, p.97. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

Gender differences within this family are also portrayed through their personalities. For instance, as a man Paw believes that he should be strong, so as to accomplish his role as head of the family. Therefore, he does not reveal his fears. In these illustrations, Paw, who is frightened of dentists, has to visit one since he suffers from a terrible toothache. When he arrives home, he lies and boasts about having attending the dentist without any worries and advises his children to follow his example.



**Figure 13.** D.C. Thomson 1975. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

The atmosphere surrounding the comic strip is positive: despite possible economic difficulties or arguments, all these situations are solved with humour. Moreover, this is a part of their close and pleasant relationship. There are multiple illustrations which show this union in their daily lives at parties, at home or at their but n' ben. For example, here 'The Broons' celebrate the New Year together at home, welcoming their neighbours:





**Figure 14.** D.C. Thomson 2008b. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

## Jackie Kay's Poems

As the next five sections consider, it is Jackie Kay who breaks some of 'The Broons' traditions through her representation of the family in five poems. The writer places them in a contemporary time, facing situations such as infidelity, a therapy session, a sexual encounter, a racist attitude, and a process of colonic irrigation. The humour of these poems lies in the ironic contrast between the characterisation of 'The Broons' in the comic strip and their portrayal in Kay's poems. Also, this contrast provides a window for comparison of old and modern Scottish values.

### 4. 'There's trouble for Maw Broom'

#### 4.1. Summary

In the poem 'There's trouble for Maw Broom', Maw as the poetic voice, recalls different changes in Paw's behaviour and character which led her to deduce that Paw was unfaithful to her. The poem highlights not only Maw's jealousy but also her frustration, sadness and disappointment.

#### 4.2. The Poetic Voice and the Addressee

Maw's poetic narrative offers us her inner thoughts and feelings through the use of the first person singular, in many examples of

personal pronouns. ‘I’ is repeated twenty-six times and ‘me’ six times. The reflexive pronoun ‘masell’ or ‘mysell’ is repeated three times, while the possessive article ‘my’ or ‘ma’ is repeated five times. Finally, the possessive pronoun ‘mine’ is repeated twice.

Maw Broon is not an unknown character for many readers of this poem who are familiar with ‘The Broons’ and can recall their characterisation and family life in the comic strip. In a BBC interview, Kay says, ‘I like just to try to imagine unexpected things for Maw Broon’ (*Lyrics BBC World Services website*). In both ‘There’s trouble for Maw Broon’ and ‘Maw Broon visits a Therapist’, Kay shows an unexpected perspective of Maw. In the first one, Maw is jealous and frustrated when she finds out that her husband is unfaithful, and in the second one, as will be considered later, Maw is fed up with her life and does not recognise herself.

The poetic voice in ‘There’s Trouble for Maw Broon’ also makes several references to her husband Paw Broon, through the personal pronouns ‘he’ (repeated twenty times) and ‘him’ (once). The possessive article ‘his’ (repeated eight times) and his name ‘Paw’ (repeated seven times).

### **4.3. Paw and Maw**

Sometimes Maw’s poetic voice refers to both Paw and herself through the possessive article ‘oor’ (repeated seven times), the personal pronoun ‘we’ (twice), and the adverb ‘thegither’ (twice). Paying attention to the words which collocate with the possessive article ‘oor’, readers notice that the elements which they share (the quilt, the table and their cottage’s roof) are very old, showing not only their long marriage but also its deterioration. Their shared possession of the ‘but n’ ben’ is defined as ‘sacred’ or as a ‘special place’; therefore, the loss of the ‘but n’ ben’ symbolizes the

relationship's demise. The following concordance obtained through *Wordsmith 3.0*. (Scott, 1999) shows the collocates of the possessive 'oor':

# of occurrence (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
1	Wiring plugs. Cleaning	<i>oor</i>	auld quilt. I wis abl
2	's been hauving it aff in	<i>oor</i>	but n' ben under oo
3	g but no the thought o'	<i>oor</i>	but n ben. It's spoil
4	ie fake it. Then he fixed	<i>oor</i>	shoogly table. That
5	in oor but n' ben under	<i>oor</i>	wee frail tin roof in
6	in and stormy weather,	<i>oor</i>	sacred but n' ben o
7	oor wee frail tin roof in	<i>oor</i>	special place when-

**Table 1.** Concordance of 'oor'

Finally, the personal pronoun 'we' and the adverb 'thegither' refer to actions in the past, since they are no longer a couple at the present time. These collective personal pronouns each occur twice in the poem.

#### 4.4. References to Infidelity

The eagerness to look for the truth is also revealed in the repetition of the noun 'truth', appearing four times in the poem, grouped towards its end (lines 47, 49, 49, and 52). This term introduces the culminating statement of infidelity.

# of occurrence (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
1	I couldnie run from the	<i>truth</i>	anymair. I'd had it
2	I ken the truth, it's the	<i>truth</i>	I ken Paw's been
3	r special place when- s'	<i>truth</i>	after a' we've be
4	it up tae here. I ken the	<i>truth</i>	, it's the truth I ke

**Table 2.** Concordance of 'truth'

It is not until the end of the poem that the poetic voice is able to openly and directly pronounce the words: 'Paw's been hauving it aff in oor but n' ben' (line 50). The poetic voice retains this information

until line fifty. In the previous lines, Paw's infidelity is only revealed in an indirect manner through the description of Paw's changes and the use of the pronoun 'it'. This holding of information emphasizes the reader's expectations and highlights the poetic voice's agony and difficulty in facing reality.

The poetic voice uses the pronouns 'it' or 'this' during the whole poem to make reference to Paw's infidelity. The difficulty to say some words also shows the innocence of the poetic voice. In this way, the pronouns substitute possible taboo words linked to swear words or sex words, neither of which would appear within the comic strip:<sup>3</sup>

# of occurrence (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
2	n Paw's been hauving	<i>it</i>	aff in oor but n' ben
3	quilt. I wis able tae see	<i>it</i>	clear as a day. There
4	ouble for Maw Broon	<i>It</i>	dawned on me, aw of
7	jacket. I couldnie take	<i>it</i>	.I couldnie fake it. Th

**Table 3.** Concordance of 'it' (Paw's infidelity)

# of occurrences (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
1	bad like my thoughts.	<i>This</i>	wis final. This wis
2	houghts. This wis final.	<i>This</i>	wis ma lot. I wis d

**Table 4.** Concordance of 'This'

#### 4.5. Paw's Representation: Poem vs. Comic

Jackie Kay utilises the stereotypical figure of Paw in the comic and completely changes it, while imagining what Maw would think if she noticed this transformation. Some of Paw's frequent characteristic habits are enumerated in the poem but are not shown in the comic strip. Kay humorously exaggerates Paw's negative behaviour; for

<sup>3</sup> The concordance program offers other instances in which the pronoun 'it' is used in the text, which are not utilised here since they do not refer back to Paw's infidelity.

instance, as belching or dribbling. In this way she stresses the contrast between Paw's previous and later manners.

In the poem Maw is aware of Paw's bad conduct, which she seems to accept. Moreover, she starts to feel angry and insecure when she perceives his changing habits. The poetic voice explains that the man seen in the comic strips (bald and unfit with a long moustache, often smoking and unable to cook) is the very same man that now has gone through a transformation. Firstly, Paw's physical condition is shown to improve, as 'wan sudden day I saw Paw wis fit' (line 6).



**Figure 15.** D.C. Thomson 2008b, p.25. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

The comic demonstrates Paw's formerly characteristic bad physical condition. Unable to follow his father's rhythm, Paw asks Granpaw to slow down, pretending to be worried about the children getting tired. In the poem, however, now his 'tache' is 'clipped neatly' (line 7), and he is unsatisfied with his baldness: 'He'd had toyed wey the thocht o' a toupe, he telt me' (line 8), as compared to Paw's representation within the comic strip: bald, with a thick moustache.



**Figure 16.** D.C. Thomson 1995. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

To Maw's despair, he is now thinking about significantly altering both. Further, he has bought himself 'a brand new bunnet' (line 9). The word 'new' appears in the text twice, and the repetition of this word underlines Paw's change:

# occurrences (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
1	ally! He bought a brand	<i>new</i>	bunnet. I couldnie
2	ther shoes, a mint on a	<i>new</i>	jacket. I couldnie t

**Table 5.** Concordance of 'new'

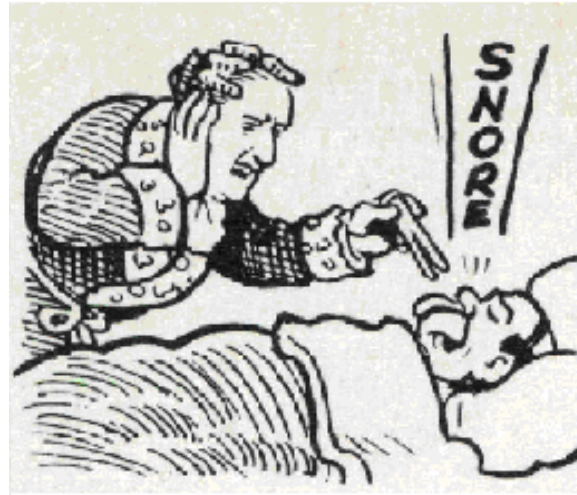
'New's antonym, 'auld', appears twice in the poem so as to refer to Paw's transformation or to the quilt which Maw and Paw shared:

# of occurrences (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
1	th. He chucked oot his	<i>auld</i>	tackety boots. He t
2	ring plugs. Cleaning oor	<i>auld</i>	quilt. I wis able ta

**Table 6.** Concordance of 'auld'

In addition to changes in physical appearance, Paw has also changed his behaviour. For example, he has 'stapped drinking spilt tea / frae his saucer' (lines 13-14), and now 'He didnae belch and say / Guid fir me! (lines 14-15) or 'tut at the TV' (line 15). His personal hygiene

has improved, as 'If he dribbled he wiped his chin' (line 16) and 'If he coughed he covered his mooth' (line 17). The illustration below, taken from a 1975 comic strip, shows Maw Broon trying to cope with Paw's snoring, suggesting this is part of Paw's past annoying habits.



**Figure 17.** D.C. Thomson 1975. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

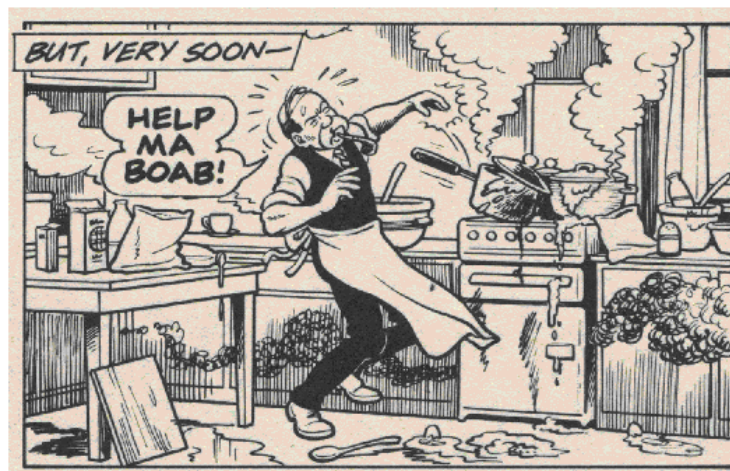


**Figure 18.** D.C. Thomson 2008b, p.25. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland



**Figure 19.** D.C. Thomson 1995. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

Figure 18 shows Maw and Paw relaxing in their living room enjoying the quiet. By contrast, in the poem, now Paw has stopped smoking both his pipe and tobacco: ‘He threw oot his pipe and his baccie’ (line 19). Whereas in figure 19 Hen, Joe, Paw, and Granpaw are taking pleasure in a football match, in Kay’s poem ‘He lost interest in fitba’ (line 20) and gains an interest in fashion, spending ‘a wee fortune on a pair / o good leather shoes (lines 25-6) and ‘a mint on a new jacket’ (line 26). He has also ‘started eating his veggies raw’ (line 21) and is no longer ‘a skinflint anymair’ (line 24).



**Figure 20.** D.C. Thomson 1995. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland



Regarding changes which describe how Paw carries out some household tasks, figure 20, taken from a 1995 comic strip, reveals that Paw's actions, although he might be willing to do some work, are always accompanied by some catastrophe. In Kay's poem he aptly 'fixed oor shoogly table' (line 28) and has begun 'Wiring plugs' (line 29) and 'Cleaning oor auld quilt' (line 31). In a crescendo of incriminating behaviour, it is revealed that now 'Paw wis looking swell / aw spruced up and smelling o' Old Spice' (lines 38-9) and 'wis late hame eight nichts in ten' (line 45).

The comparative aspects of Paw are approached via very different media in poem and comic. In the poems readers have no illustrations to help to characterize the poetic voice; therefore, the poet can only rely on language for definition. In the poem, Maw Broon is identified as the poetic voice through: (1) the use of her name; (2) the references to common topics in the strip; and, (3) the kind of language she uses, including Scots words. Jackie Kay comments on this third aspect for a BBC interview and highlights that the language of 'The Broons' seems to be very useful in conveying powerful emotion such as jealousy (*Lyrics BBC World Services* website).

## **5. 'Maw Broon Visits a Therapist'**

This poem presents a dialogue between Maw Broon, the poetic voice, and a therapist. In this conversation, readers only hear Maw who talks about her feelings and worries. Maw is again placed in an unexpected situation; therefore, the reader is surprised by Maw's feelings of frustration and loneliness since these are not perceived in the comic strip, in which we assume Maw's happiness is fulfilling her role as a housewife.

The poem is constructed through the inferred conversation between Maw and the unseen therapist, who is deduced through Maw's questions, complaints and references to him/her. Through the use of questions, Maw's state of mind is revealed: first, she shows her anger and uncertainty towards the therapist's behaviour by asking 'How come you've no get anything tae say' (line 17) and 'Whit's wrang. Am A' no daeing it right?' (line 19). Similarly, her complaints are presented in an affirmative form: 'You've no opened yir mooth.' (line 18), 'A' dinny ken hoo yir supposed tae dae therapy.' (line 20), 'Michty. This is awfy awkward.'(line 22), 'You've no said a dickie bird' (line 23), and 'Och. This therapy's making me crabbit.' (line 28). Second, Maw Broon gets 'feedback' from the therapist by asking 'ken whit A' mean' (line 6), 'Jings. Dae A' jist talk on like this?' (line 21), and 'A'm quite guid / at this therapy lark eh?' (lines 41-2). Additionally, by reproducing the therapist's words, she enables the readers to hear this second voice through the poetic voice's repetition:

Tell you a dream? (line 24)  
 An image? Whit kind of image? (line 26)  
 What comes tae mind?(line 27)  
 Whit represents whit? (line 28)  
 How dae A' see masell? (line 32)

Finally, the poetic voice addresses the therapist informally through the use of the pronoun 'you' and the possessive 'yir':

# of occurrences (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
1	therapist. Sit there like	<i>you</i>	are, glaikit, a box
2	This is awfy awkward.	<i>You</i>	've no said a dickie
3	got anything tae say?	<i>You</i>	've no opened yir m
4	the noo. How come	<i>you</i>	've no got anything t
5	said a dickie bird. Tell	<i>you</i>	a dream? Crivens,

**Table 7.** Concordance of 'you'

# of occurrences (N)	Collocates	Node	Collocates
2	ay? You've no opened	<i>yir</i>	mooth. Whit's wran

**Table 8.** Concordance of 'yir'

Maw even imagines herself replacing the therapist:

Here Maw Broon could be a therapist.  
 Sit there like you are, glaikit,  
 a box o tissues and a clock,  
 a few wee emmms and aaas. (lines 43-6)

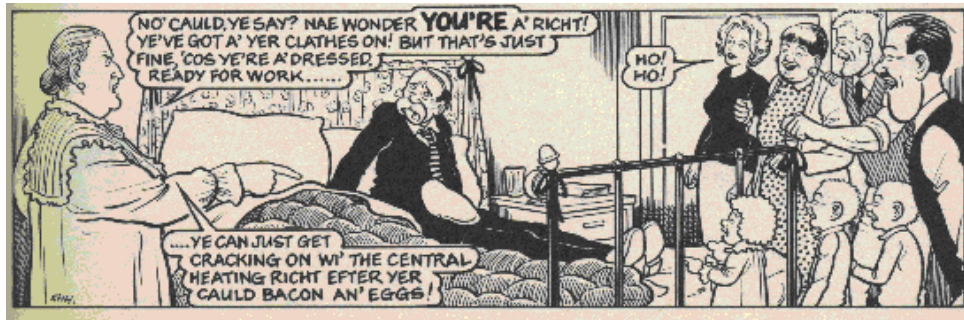
The features which characterise and dishearten the poetic voice coincide with those which represent her in the comic strip. The comic strip character accepts them, but the poetic voice can no longer stand that situation. This poem can be understood as a social criticism of traditional values that put women in the house to take care of the children, emphasizing the way that Kay joins drama and humour.

Maw's description in the poem can be classified in three areas: physical, psychological and familiar. For instance, Maw is imagined talking about her bun as an onion, and this may be a way of expressing her disappointment and perception of herself:

How dae A' see masell?  
 Weel. Am fed up wey ma bun.  
 It is jist a big onion.  
 at the back o'ma heid.  
 A'canny let ma hair doon. (lines 32-6)

The poetic voice achieves willingness in the poem; however, in the comic strip, it is never imagined whether Maw would like to 'let [her] hair doon.' The poetic voice continues describing Maw's physical appearance, comparing herself with a cottage and describing herself as a sturdy person with the following unpleasant words: 'A'm built like a bothy, hefty' (line 37).

Regarding her mood in the poem, Maw feels stress and, consequently, considers that she is frequently tired and angry, in line 38. Compared to the comic, we notice that, even though Maw is often the one who keeps it all together, she has loads of work and gets annoyed at the members of the family who usually misbehave, as figure 21 shows:



**Figure 21.** D.C. Thomson 1995. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland



**Figure 22.** The Broons © The Sunday D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

Figure 22 illustrates Maw's housewife role and all the work she has to complete as the serious and responsible member of the family. The family take advantage of this situation and do not think that their mother could give up and leave everything behind. The comics confirm her anxieties and her indispensable role in the family's daily life, as mother, keeper, organizer, and referee. By contrast, in Kay's poem, Maw expressly confesses her worries:

Ma hale family taks me for grantit  
 A'll aye be the wan tae dae it.  
 whitever it is (lines 39-41)

## 6. 'Paw Broon on the Starr Report'

Paw Broon, after reading *The Starr Report*, tries to convince his wife, or rather imposes upon her, to have oral sex in the same way President Clinton had.

In the poem, there is a double cultural reference: first, the reference to 'The Broons'; the other, the reference to *The Starr Report* — the 1998 text which examines the relationship between Monica Lewinsky and President Bill Clinton. Paw tells Maw that he too has his rights as a married man and attempts to assert those rights.

Several reasons could have led Jackie Kay to refer to *The Starr Report*. First, it establishes a link between Paw Broon, a comic character, and the real world. In this way, Paw develops as a human being, a citizen, who lives in the same world as the reader. Second, it contextualizes Paw Broon, a person who has lived during or after *The Starr Report* publication, around 1998. Third, it includes the taboo word 'sex' and the even more taboo 'oral sex'. Additionally, it establishes a contrast between traditional society as represented in 'The Broons' and contemporary society living in the moment in which *The Starr Report* was published. Finally, it encourages thinking about new societal values in comparison to the old ones.

There are differences between Paw's portrayal in the comic strip versus in the poem. The poetic voice of Paw commands his wife, ordering her and being impolite. This behaviour is exemplified by affirmative statements which do not allow Maw the possibility of refusal, such as 'I'm hauving it wey you' (line 5) and:

There's no use in you  
 saying 'Naw Paw' again Christ,  
 the President  
 gets it, so so kin I. (lines 7-10)

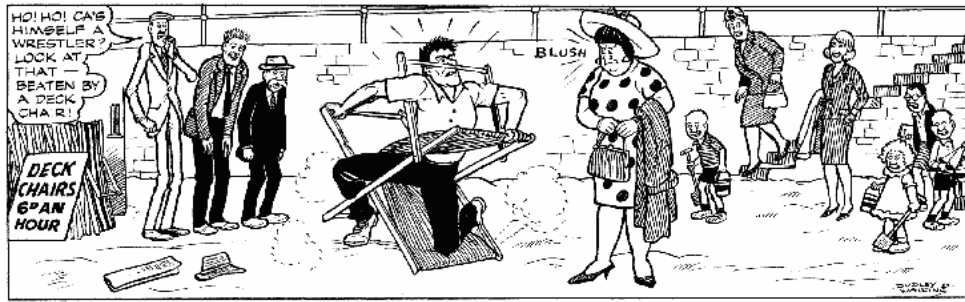
The imperative sentences Paw uses to command his wife further exemplify this portrayal in the poem, such as ‘Get yir heid doon wuman, / an hae a guid sook.’ (lines 11-12), ‘Christ, wait a minite.’ (line 13), and ‘Dinny lick gingerly’ (line 15).

As Jackie Kay confirms at a BBC Scotland interview, ‘The Broons are the last people you expect to be sexual’ (*Lyrics BBC World Services website*):



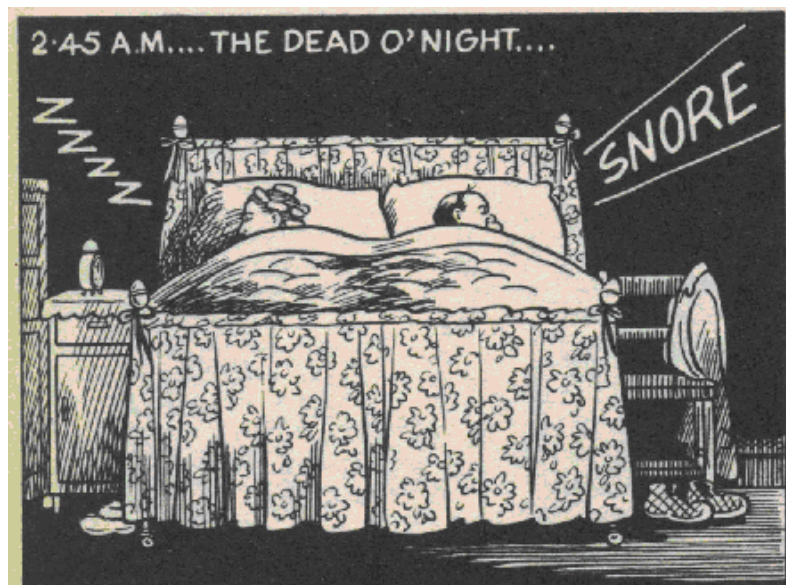
**Figure 23.** D.C. Thomson 1975. *The Broons* © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

In figure 23 the elder sisters — Maggie and Daphne — and the elder brothers — Joe and Hen — share their time with possible boyfriends or girlfriends; however, there is never a sexual encounter, and the family is always aware of the different partners with whom their children go out.



**Figure 24.** D.C. Thomson 2008b, p.111. The Broons © The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

In this comic, the whole family meets Daphne's new boyfriend - apparently, a fighter; however, the family laughs out loud since he is unable to open a deck chair.



**Figure 25.** D.C. Thomson 1995. The Broons (c) The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

Further, marital intimacy is portrayed in the comic strip, but both husband and wife are sleeping looking at opposite sides without touching each other. Maw is dreaming peacefully and wearing curlers while Paw is snoring.

## 7. 'The Broon's Bairn's Black'



**Figure 26.** Illustration adapted from 'The Broons' webpage. The Broons (c) The Sunday Post D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

In this poem, in contrast to the others, no member of the family seems to be the poetic voice; however, reference is made to the younger child of 'The Broons', the Bairn. A personified Scotland finds out that this little girl, characterised by her golden curls, blue eyes, white complexion, and chubby cheeks, is black.

This poem follows the format of a skipping or nursery rhyme; however, the content is not so innocent. This contrast highlights the cruelty of racism in Scotland as well as possible failures in the education and values which Scottish society has offered its population, since this socially impacting comic strip is meant to transmit happiness and family values. The parallelism of the three first lines, 'Scotland is having a heart attack / Scotland is having a heart attack / Scotland is having a heart attack', underlines their content. However, it also emphasizes the only line which is not repeated in the poem: 'The Broon's Bairn's Black' (line 4).

## 8. 'Maw Broon goes for colonic irrigation'

In this poem, Kay not only reproduces the language in 'The Broons' comic but also the format. As she explained during her reading at Stirling University, she decided to introduce a rhyme at the beginning of the poem: 'Maw Broon finds a new hobby / says



cheerio to the impacted jobby’. This rhyme is similar to the ones that serve as an introduction to each comic strip. Maw, the poetic voice in this poem, is again placed in an unpredicted situation, describing her experience of colonic irrigation and the physical and psychological relief she felt afterwards. This poem is surprising and different from the comic strip, not only due to the unforeseen scene but also due to its topic, colonic irrigation, and its consequent lexis, such as the child’s word ‘jobby’ — the Scottish term for the word ‘shit’.

## **9. Conclusion**

By placing the ‘The Broons’ in unexpected situations, such as having a sexual encounter or visiting a therapist, these poems underline a contrast between traditional and new values, which leads the reader to measure and consider the differences. This criticism of beliefs and ideas is expressed through a mixture of drama and humour.

Comparatively, this study contends with three main objectives: the relevance of cultural references in Jackie Kay’s poetry; secondly, the importance of national icons — in this case, ‘The Broons’ for Scotland; and, finally, Jackie Kay’s examination of Scotland through the allusion to this famous comic strip. Arguably, these poems might be read differently by a person unaware of ‘The Broons’ comic and what they represent for Scotland. Therefore the reading of the poems is far more enriching for those readers who are conscious of this cultural reference and can readily perceive different layers of meaning.

This analysis is an introduction to a future research which will approach Jackie Kay’s poetic voice through ‘The Broons’ by means of a contrastive corpus stylistics study. In this later work, two different corpora are created. The main corpus, includes the five

poems in which the author makes reference to ‘The Broons’. The second one, a reference corpus, is made of fifty comic strips of the 1975 Broons annual. The research aims to further interrogate whether Jackie Kay makes use of the characters’ language in the comic strip so as to create the poetic voices in these five poems.

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