



Langston Hughes, pictured above, wrote "The Weary Blues," featured opposite. "I, Too, Sing America," also by Hughes, is featured on page 69 of this volume. Photo: Gordon Parks, photographer, Library of Congress



The Weary Blues

by Langston Hughes

Content Synopsis

“The Weary Blues” is a poem in which the speaker describes his experience listening to blues music in a Harlem nightclub. The poem is written in rhymed couplets that mimic the rhythms of blues music using various literary techniques such as alliteration, “Droning a drowsy...,” and onomatopoeia, “thump, thump, thump ...” The speaker pays special attention to the actions of the piano player, depicting him “Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon” and doing a “lazy sway” as he played from his “rickety stool.” Hughes injects phrases such as “Sweet Blues!” and “O Blues!” into the poem in between descriptions to emphasize the emotion and passion that went into the pianist’s performance.

The second half of the poem includes the use of song lyrics written in African American southern dialect to capture the full power and passion of the Blues. Lines such as “Ain’t got nobody in all this world” and “I ain’t happy no mo’ and I wish that I had died” sung as the player made his “old piano moan” help recapture the speaker’s experience and illustrate the power of blues music on both the player and the listener.

The poem ends as the speaker suggests that after the performer stops singing and playing the piano, he continues to hear the blues music playing in his head. The last line of the poem states that the piano player then slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.”

The last line implies the hard life and struggles of the piano player, which are reflected in the blues music he performs.

Symbols & Motifs

Hughes uses repetition, alliteration, assonance, and rhyme in order to replicate the pace and rhythm of blues music as well as the overall melancholy associated with the music. Hughes includes elements of personification in “The Weary Blues” to bring the piano to life. It “moans” as the player sings the blues. The image of a moaning piano accentuates the tone of the music and further enhances the musical effect of the poem. The song lyric included in the song also help to illustrate the nature of the blues as a crying out of sorrow and loneliness.

Historical Context

Langston Hughes’ success and the rising popularity of blues music coincided with the Harlem Renaissance, a time when African Americans were thriving in the fields of art, music, and literature (“Langston Hughes and the Blues”). During the 1920s, black artists were achieving wide spread recognition for the first time. Harlem became a cultural hub where writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes moved to immerse themselves in the thriving community of arts and letters (“Langston Hughes and the Blues”). As more and more African Americans

moved north, blues music evolved and addressed more urban topics and focused on social injustice. At this time, performers such as Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith played for black and white audiences alike in Harlem nightclubs (“Langston Hughes and the Blues”).

Hughes wrote “The Weary Blues” after listening to the blues in a Harlem nightclub one March night in 1922 (Sime and Wahlgreen 761). Hughes then set out to write a poem that integrated music, speech, and poetry. He used sound devices such as alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia to replicate the sounds of blues music. He included song lyrics written in dialect and constructed the poem in rhymed couplets typical of traditional lyric poetry (Sime and Wahlgreen 761). The last line of the poem took Hughes two years to write, but when he completed it, “The Weary Blues” was a success and launched his flourishing literary career (Sime and Wahlgreen 761).

Societal Context

Blues music originated from Negro folk music sung by freed slaves after the Civil War (“Langston Hughes and the Blues”). It depicted the lives of Negroes at the turn of the 20th century and expressed feelings of frustration at the prejudice and poverty that dominated this population at the time (“Langston Hughes and the Blues”). Unlike the old hymns and spirituals sung by Negroes, blues music is designed to be sung as a solo (“Langston Hughes and the Blues”). Blues music always has an element of the improvisational and changes with each individual performer (Sime and Wahlgreen 763). Lines are often repeated and some are borrowed from other songs (Sime and Wahlgreen 763). The lyrics are often ironic and comment on daily life and, of course, love (“Langston Hughes and the Blues”). A famous contemporary blues singer, B.B. King, commented that the blues is always about a man losing a woman (Sime and Wahlgreen 763).

The first blues recordings were made in 1920 and feature singers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Most blues music was first performed in northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York where many Negroes migrated to escape the oppression of the South (Sime and Wahlgreen 763). Many fashionable nightclubs opened in Harlem, the setting of Hughes’s poem.

Religious Context

“The Weary Blues” does not have a specific religious context.

Scientific & Technological Context

“The Weary Blues” does not have a specific scientific or technological context.

Biographical Context

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri to an abolitionist family (Jackson). He started writing poetry in the eighth grade but was encouraged by his father to study engineering (Jackson). He attended Columbia University briefly but dropped out to pursue a career as a writer. He was an avid reader and admired poets such as Walt Whitman, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg (Simes and Wahlgreen 760).

His first poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” was published in *Brownie’s Book*—a children’s magazine published by the NAACP from 1920–1921 (Jackson). He traveled to Africa, Russia, and Europe on a freighter in 1923, moved to Harlem in 1924, and found inspiration in the clubs where he would listen to jazz and blues music (Jackson). He moved to Washington D.C. for a year in 1925 and met poet Vachel Lindsay at a restaurant where Hughes was bussing tables (Simes and Wahlgreen 760). Hughes left a few of his poems at Lindsay’s table and the Lindsay liked them so much that he read them at a public reading that night; an event which made Hughes a minor celebrity for a time (Simes and Wahlgreen 760).

In 1926, Hughes' first book of poetry, "The Weary Blues," was published and he moved back to Harlem. His poetry embraced the African American experience and often imitated jazz and blues music. Later in his life, he wrote poems specifically to be accompanied by jazz music (Simes and Wahlgreen 760). Hughes died from cancer in 1967. He had a successful career for over 40 years and published poetry, short stories, scripts, plays and autobiographies (Jackson). He is the first black person known in the United States to support himself solely through his writing ("Langston Hughes and the Blues").

Jennifer Bouchard

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Discussion Questions

1. What is the tone of the poem?
2. Identify the sensory details that Hughes includes in the poem.
3. How would you describe the rhythm of the poem?
4. What techniques did Hughes choose to create this rhythm?
5. What troubles might the pianist in the poem be experiencing?
6. Hughes spent two years writing the ending of this poem. Do you think the ending works?
7. What do you know about Blues music? Is there a blues influence in some of the music that is popular today?
8. Why is Langston Hughes considered a great American poet?

Essay Ideas

1. Write your own blues poem.
2. Read more poetry by Langston Hughes and write an essay in which you analyze his poetic style, themes, and structure.
3. Write an essay in which you compare the poetry of Langston Hughes to one of his big influences, Carl Sandburg or Walt Whitman.
4. Listen to some famous examples of blues music and write an essay in which you compare Hughes' poetry to blues music. What are some common elements? How do blues and Hughes' poetry reflect the "Negro soul?"
5. Explore visual art produced during the Harlem Renaissance such as the paintings of Aaron Douglas or the photographs of James Van Der Zee and compare it to the blues poetry of Langston Hughes.

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