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Essay 2

“The Weary Blues”

W.E.B. Du Bois said, “One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Hunter 423). In the poem “The Weary Blues” by Langston Hughes, the speaker relates his emotional experience listening to a black blues player in a bar in Harlem. The speaker captures the dilapidated feeling of the shady blues joint in his recounting of the story. The speaker communicates the piano player’s musical style and his melancholy, expressive demeanor. The speaker shares some of the lyrics from the tired bluesman and tells how the musician finally quit playing and “slept like rock or a man that’s dead” (line 35). Hughes combines varied form, through meter, sound devices, line-pacing and rhythm with clever narration to present one of the “coolest,” most soulful poems ever written. Hughes also explores the theme of identity and what it means to be Black and American. In this discussion, we will explore how Hughes celebrates the awakening of the new American Black consciousness and the powerful ways the author employs form to enhance meaning in “The Weary Blues.”

In the very first lines, Hughes lays out the tone and the situation of the poem. The speaker states, “Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, / Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon, / I heard a negro play.” Notice how the speaker first relates the feelings associated before he explains what is going on. First he tells of a tired tune that drones. The song itself is personified as being drowsy or tired. By using the word “droning” we feel that the music is repetitive and slow-paced. The word “syncopated” is a musical term that means the rhythm is a bit off-beat, with a “placement of rhythmic stresses or accents where they wouldn't normally occur" (Hoffman). Then the second line speaks of the motion. The language allows for ambiguity, we are not sure if it’s the speaker swaying, or if it’s the Negro musician. This merging of the speaker with the blues player continues throughout the whole poem; these first couple lines just hint at the future oneness shared between listener and musician. From just the first two lines we feel the tiredness; we feel the repetition; we feel the swaying syncopation; we can almost hear the tune; and now everyone seems to be swaying together, including the reader. After the tone and rhythm have been introduced, line three introduces the situation more fully: the speaker is listening to a black musician play.

The sounds of the words and their meaning combine together in the first and second line to enhance the tone. The alliteration of “droning” and “Drowsy” give a nice verbal rhythmic sway. By placing a soft “a” between the hard “dr” words, the combination gives a syncopated sound, which is further enhanced by giving two long “o” sounds that are pronounced differently in “Drowsy” and “droning.” Thus the sound devices work to display the unpredictable nature of the rhythm, with some parts drawn out long and sudden stops like the word “tune” at the end of the line. We notice a lot of assonance, as in the use of the “o” in “droning,” “syncopated” and “mellow.” Furthermore, the sound of the language continues in onomatopoetic fashion, as in the phrase, “Rocking back and forth,” which sounds just like what it is describing in the iambic meter (2). The alliteration of the “ck” consonants in “rocking” and “back” slam a strong verbal downbeat between the unstressed “ing” and “and” syllables. The word “croon” at the end of the second line means the laid-back and soulful kind of singing like Louis Armstrong or Frank Sinatra. The word “croon” also carries the connotation of singing softly to a baby. The connotation connects to the image of rocking back and forth, just as a father might sing to a crying child and rock the baby back and forth. The blues are considered to be a way to express one’s troubled feelings to find relief, so the imagery of a father soothing a child is like the blues soothing the Negro player’s soul. The speaker uses rhyme at the end of the first two lines to tie the lines together and to mimic the sound of blues, which often rhyme. He continues to rhyme most of the lines throughout the poem in an un-patterned sort of way, much like how the blues tune itself is syncopated.

The form of the third, sixth and seventh lines speak to the bluesy nature of the poem. The third line uses enjambment and indentation. The extra white space makes the reader pause between the second and third line. And because the line is comprised of six syllables instead of the longer ten syllable lines, the white space sandwiches the phrase, so the reader sort of pauses, delivers the line, and then waits. This rhythmic formulation imitates the structure of a type of blues line where the short phrase sticks out like a punch line. The sixth and seventh lines are tied to this third line, they read: “He did a lazy sway…. / He did a lazy sway…. .” Notice these two lines are also indented and six syllables long; the repeated lines also rhyme with “play.” Hughes’ use of the ellipses stretches the length of the lines out, especially the last rhymed and repeated word: “sway.” Hughes really emphasizes the word sway; indeed, he later says the bluesman was “swaying to and fro” (12). If the reader is not physically swaying as the poem is read by this point, Hughes would be very disappointed.

Lines four and five give valuable information about the setting and situation of the poem. The speaker relates that he was “on Lenox Avenue the other night.” We now understand that the speaker is talking about an experience he had a few nights ago. By using the comfortable phrase “the other night,” we feel we are on friendly terms with the speaker. It’s as though the speaker is just telling a story to his friend: the reader. Lenox Avenue was a famous street in Harlem, New York. Therefore, Hughes places the poem right in the heart of Harlem in an old blues bar, which is vital because Hughes’ work is also at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance: “a period of ten or fifteen years in the early twentieth century when an extraordinary (and extraordinarily talented) group of people came together in uptown Manhattan to celebrate (and embody) the awakening of a new American black consciousness” (Hunter 423). It would appear that the whole purpose of the poem was to do just that: celebrate and embody the awakening of a new black consciousness—in appropriately cool and soulful setting of a blues bar.

Now that the swaying rhythm, the melancholy tone and the setting have been established, Hughes is free to deliver classic lines of poetry. Lines eight and nine are beautiful: “With his ebony hands on each ivory key / He made that poor piano moan with melody.” The lines are saturated with assonance and alliteration. The internal rhyme between “ebony,” “ivory” and “key” is especially beautiful and subtle. The juxtaposition between the ebony hands (like the color of the black piano keys between the white ones) and the ivory white keys becomes seared into the mind’s eye of the reader. This powerful image truly embodies the nature of the new Black American consciousness. The Black folks are American, as indeed, are the white folks. There is an inevitable mingling between the two races—who, in many ways are as different as, well, black and white! The personification of the moaning piano is another instance of merging. Before, the tune itself was drowsy, now the piano is moaning as if in pain, but it is not the music that is drowsy, nor the piano that is in pain, it is the musician who is weary and suffering. But the skill of the musician and the depths of his internal anguish and struggle make the piano, the music and even the audience feel consubstantial.

The speaker starts to get so excited by the music and the situation that his narration style shifts. In line eleven someone shouts “O Blues!” We are not sure if the musician shouts it, or if the speaker does, or if it’s everyone together in the bar. Like the other parts of the poem, the speaker and musician’s actions are ambiguously described. This ambiguity works to bring the Negro player and the speaker so close that we can hardly tell who’s who. Later, someone shouts out: “Sweet Blues!” Then the speaker doesn’t even give a complete sentence he is so into the moment. He says, “Coming from a black man’s soul” (15). The connotation of the word “soul” here seems to speak more to the source of creative power and emotion than simply the man’s spirit. This line sticks out as it is wedged between the shouted lines: “Sweet Blues!” and “O Blues!” The speaker is really relating to the music being expressed now. Notice how the speaker doesn’t specify which black man’s soul the blues is coming from. He says *a* black man’s soul. It’s as if blues are pouring forth from the speaker’s own soul as well as the musician’s soul, as he participates in the whole experience of the music, the environment and the other man’s creative expression.

In lines 19-22, as the speaker quotes the lyrics from the blues player, we are led deeper into the nuanced theme of racial identity and connection in relation to narrative style. Line 18 reads, “I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—”. The speaker uses an em dash to introduce the quotes. This is an untraditional grammatical form to introduce quotes. Again, Hughes opts for a more ambiguous approach to enhance the idea of merging. Then we hear the song:

“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,

Ain’t got nobody but ma self.

I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’

And put ma troubles on the shelf” (19-22).

In an interesting twist Hughes writes the words of the song colloquially, as a Negro man would speak. So the narrative style transitions from the beginning of the poem to now. First the speaker sounds sophisticated using words like “syncopated” and speaking of the “dull pallor.” Then the narration digresses to less complicated vocabulary and broken grammar. The speaker starts shouting “O Blues!” By line nineteen the speaker really embraces a colloquial form and just quotes the song. From this moment onward the speaker uses only short, one or two-syllable words. This vocabulary transformation speaks to the fleshly part of the speaker’s soul. In other words, as the speaker gets deeper into the experience of the blues, he stops analyzing what is happening from a logical perspective and just feels the music with his heart.

Through the words and the circumstance Hughes speaks to the true nature of the blues in the final part of the poem. The singer cries out:

‘Got the Weary Blues

And can’t be satisfied—

I ain’t happy no mo’ /

And I wish that I had died’ (27-30).

The blues player is extremely distraught as he moans that he is so unhappy he wants to be dead. Hughes really emphasizes that the man isn’t happy by using an internal rhyme and a spondee at the end of the line with “no mo’.” He also really emphasizes the word “died,” placing it at the end of all the lyrics in the poem and rhyming it with both lines ending with “satisfied.” Hughes wants us to know that the player is very unhappy. Yet, it is strange that the Negro player seems so hopeless after he just said he was going to put his “troubles on the shelf” (22). But perhaps the blues player is putting his troubles on the shelf through the very act of singing about his extreme feelings of dissatisfaction and depression. That is after all, the heart of what blues is: an expression of deep sorrow that brings a kind of relief. In this way blues are like weeping, when we cry we feel better even though we are sad—a kind of expressive therapy.

The final lines mesh narrative style and strong imagery to bring the poem to a powerful conclusion. The lines read:

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead (31-35).

The narration suddenly shifts from first person to third person, as the speaker suddenly seems to have access into the thoughts of the singer. The shift in tone and style is also apparent in the hyperbolized image of the stars and moon going out like lamps. Again, the narrator’s voice has transitioned and the wording is simplified. The last three rhymes are almost childlike, rhyming “bed,” “head” and “dead.” This simplified style of vocabulary points to the amalgamation between the speaker and the bluesman. These two men are connected, even if the speaker is more educated or even partly a white man, as Hughes was, the black part of the two men connects them. They have a shared legacy of suffering and oppression. Even in 1920’s New York racial oppression was very palpable, indeed, even today, the oppression of Black Americans continues. The only relief that the Negro man could find was playing the Weary Blues. In the end, he got his troubled wish because he slept like “a man that’s dead” (35). Hughes gives us a picture of the shared suffering between all Black Americans. He doesn’t judge the class division between educated and non-educated, in fact, he brings the two characters closely together and emphasizes the similarities. The new Black American consciousness is aware of the old palimpsest of oppression and willing to move doggedly ahead into the racially amalgamous future.

Works Cited

Hoffman, Miles (1997). “Syncopation”. *National Symphony Orchestra*. NPR. Retrieved 7 April 2014.

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