

## **Ebony Hands on Ivory Keys: Tracing the Influence of Blues Music on the Early Poems of Langston Hughes**

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**Article History:** Submitted-03/09/2020, Revised-15/10/2020, Accepted-17/10/2020, Published-31/10/2020.

### **Abstract:**

Sherley A. Williams, in her work *“The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,”* has defined ‘ethnopoetics’ as, “new forms of poetry which develop as a result of the interfaces or confrontations between different cultures.” The Blues are one of the earliest documented art forms that directly emerged because of the complex cultural exchange between African slaves and Europeans on the North American continent. African-American literature materialized out of the tension between the European literary tradition and the folk/oral tradition of the African people and has made a lasting impression on contemporary African-American poetry. Blues music was created from the living conditions and emotional experiences of African-Americans in the southern United States.

Since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s, the complex relationship between the Afro-American oral and literary traditions has become the focal point of Afro-American literary and cultural criticism. Langston Hughes was the first poet to incorporate the blues tradition in the poetic form to claim his cultural heritage and assert his black identity, a concept he explores in his 1926 essay *“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”*

This paper aims to study the relationship between the blues musical form and the early poetry of Langston Hughes, to show how Hughes mined the Afro-American oral tradition to create his blues-inspired poetry, to trace the influence of early blues artists such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and others on Hughes; and through comparison demonstrate how the structure, rhythms, motifs and musical techniques of the 12-bar blues are reflected in Hughes's poems. For the purpose of this study, I have selected poems composed between 1921 to 1930 and have elaborated on their blues features such as the use of the AAB stanza, use of travel imagery, and the representation of rivers – all of

which are distinctly related to the blues song tradition. The research aims to contribute to our understanding of the importance of the literary and musical dialogue and the exchange of ideas between two cultures during a particular period and its echoes today.

**Keywords:** African-American poetry, blues music, ethnopoetics, folk and oral traditions.

## Introduction

In order to trace the influence of Blues music on the early poems of Langston Hughes, it is first essential to understand the meaning of 'blues music' and to establish its origin, features, and structure.

## Historical Background

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, people were kidnapped from the continent of Africa, forced into slavery in the American colonies, and forced to work as slaves in tobacco, indigo, rice, and cotton plantations. The American War of Independence (1776) saw the birth of the United States of America – a place that assured its people the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, the growing community of the African people in the USA was excluded from the concept of a liberated state. A life of enslavement, exploitation, and agony awaited the Negro in the land of the free. Towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Abolition Movement had gathered momentum. Eventually, under the presidency of Lincoln, the nation was torn into a bloody Civil War (1861-1865). On September 22, 1862, President Lincoln issued a preliminary emancipation proclamation, and on January 1, 1863, he made it official that “*slaves within any state or designated part of a State... in rebellion...shall be then, henceforward and forever free.*” The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment adopted on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1865, officially abolished slavery. Former slaves received the rights of citizenship and the “equal protection” of the Constitution in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the right to vote in the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Despite all the efforts to emancipate the African-Americans, there was a rebirth of white supremacy, including the rise of the Ku Klux Klan which terrorized the South from 1887 onwards making the Reconstruction period a frustrating experience for the African-Americans.

The collective experience of the African-American community – the slavery, the brutality, and the suppression, required a vent and this was provided by a distinct genre of music that came to be known as “the blues.”

## **Blues Music: Origins and Definitions**

Blues music represented the opposing voice that refused to be silenced by oppression and segregation. The Blues expressed this with unprecedented clarity, honesty, and simplicity. African-American slaves sang while working either on the plantations or while constructing the railroad tracks. The slave masters noticed that the singing practice gave working men and women more strength and endurance on the fields, and that “there was usually a lead singer who set the pace for the group. In fact, when slaves were auctioned, singers with the strongest voices brought top prices” (Kebede, 130). On the plantations, slaves often engaged in satirical songs, spirituals, and secular songs which evolved into blues music that retained the hollers, cries and calls from the plantations. In this new form of music, “natural pauses in the melody were filled in with clapping, stomping, patten', vocal outbursts” (Southern 201). “These instruments and methods came to be used in an attempt to recreate African style music in another system and under new circumstances and arose as new practices due to adaptation. The blues thus expressed love, pain, mortality, celebration, it contained the realities and narratives of African societies and the interactions between individuals; it was a translation of life experiences, a reflection, a version of history through its many varieties” (Floyd 1995).

### **Features of blues music and the blues stanza**

Blues helped in the formation of a cultural identity that was suddenly possible through the end of slavery. According to Dr. Adam Gussow, a better understanding of “the blues” can be achieved by classifying it into the following sections –

1. Blues Conditions
2. Blues Feelings
3. Blues Music
4. Blues Ethos.

Blues Conditions or situations lead to blues feelings which seep into blues expressiveness which is represented by blues music and the entire process is surrounded by the blues ethos. ‘Blues conditions’ include harsh social realities such as racism, Jim Crow laws, segregation, lynching, poverty, failed love, unrequited love or abusive personal relationships. ‘Blues Feelings’ consist of loneliness, hopelessness, an inferiority complex, anger at romantic mistreatment, romantic hopelessness, a sense of worthlessness, shame or

guilt; a sense of hope or renewed possibility and hopefulness. ‘Blues Music’ is defined by certain characteristic traits such as the ‘AAB’ stanza form, call and response pattern, blues melodic elements such as pitch-bending, worrying of a line, melisma and use of field-hollers and makeshift instruments. Blues Ethos, according to Kalamu ya Salaam is, “*the stoic persistence in the face of disappointment and disaster; faith in the karmic workings of the universe; the ability to laugh in the face of pain, a sense of humour based on the frank confrontation with the unpleasant facts of life and an insistence on mocking and belittling pain by exaggerating it.*” It is “*an insistence on sharing ones blues by performing them, either with an imputed audience or with an actual community, rather than suffering silently and alone.*” (Gussow)

The blues use a number of stanza forms, but the three-line “AAB” stanza is so omnipresent as to have become the standard from which all others are seen as deviating. This form, which is also known as the 12-bar blues format, is generated by a single line which is first repeated often with minor impromptu variations also known as ‘worrying the line’, and then rhymed in a line that elaborates on or answers it. For example, the following lines from ‘Booster Blues’ by Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893-1929).

*“I went to the depot and I set my suitcase down  
Well I went to the depot and set my suitcase down  
I thought about my baby and the tears come rollin' down”*

The first line makes a statement whereas the second line reprises the statement with a slight variation in the attitude, thus intensifying the original statement. The second and third lines are often referred to as the “repeat line” and the “response line.” In performance the blues stanza generates dramatic suspense by setting out a proposition in the first two line which has the audience guessing and anticipating the closure of rhyme and sense in the response line. This suspense gives the singer or lyricist opportunities for a surprising twist that usually has elements of irony, humour, understatement and other effects. The repeat line heightens the suspense by delaying the resolution, for example the following lyrics of a folk song by an unknown writer expresses both tragically and ironically the conflicting emotions about mortality:

*“I’m goin’ to lay my head on some lonesome railroad track  
I’m goin’ to lay my head on some lonesome railroad track  
And when the train come along, I’ll snatch my damn head back.”*

In Hughes's poetry, each line is halved so that the stanza is presented in six lines rather than in three. In his case, lines 1-2 perform the role of the twelve-bar blues stanza's first line, lines 3-4 work together as the repeat line, and lines 5-6 constitute the response. This pattern prevails in poems such as 'Homesick Blues'(1927), 'Bound No'th Blues' (1927), 'Lonesome Place' (1927), 'Hard Daddy'(1927), 'Young Gal's Blues'(1927) as well as sections of 'Weary Blues'(1926). I have included here Hughes's "Lonesome Place" in its entirety as it exemplifies Hughes's approach to the AAB blues stanza. These lines recall the classic three-line twelve-bar blues lyric stanza.

*I got to leave this town.  
It's a lonesome place.  
Got to leave this town cause  
It's a lonesome place.  
A po', po' boy can't  
Find a friendly face.*

*Goin' down to de river  
Flowin' deep an' slow.  
Goin' down to de river  
Deep an' slow-  
Cause there ain't no worries  
Where de waters go.*

*I'm weary, weary,  
Weary, as I can be.  
Weary, weary,  
Weary as can be.  
This life's so weary,  
'S' bout to overcome me.*

In another popular poem, 'The Weary Blues' (1926) Hughes describes an evening of listening to a blues pianist and singer in Harlem. With the employment of the African-American dialect and the inclusion of blues lyrics, the poem gives its reader an insight into

the mind of the blues musician in the poem. The Weary Blues was one of the first poems to incorporate basic blues forms and include the twelve-bar blues lyric to evoke the style and substance of the blues.

*“I got the Weary Blues  
And I can’t be satisfied.  
Got the Weary Blues  
And can’t be satisfied—  
I ain’t happy no mo’  
And I wish that I had died.”*

Hughes typically ends a line on a minor word. This technique intensifies expectations of the conclusion that parallels the harmonic resolve within the music. It additionally isolates the next line so that visually, at least, it stands alone as a grammatical unit. This variation in style carries the influences of songs like Bessie Smith’s (1894-1937) ‘Poor Man’s Blues’, the opening stanza of the lyric is as follows –

*Mister Rich Man, Rich Man  
Open up your heart and mind  
Mister Rich Man, Rich Man  
Open up your heart and mind  
Give the poor man a chance  
Help stop these hard, hard time.*

“A number of African-American poets have written poems based on the less structured blues forms; few however, have attempted to utilize the deceptively simple classic blues structure. Langston Hughes is an exception. The sophistication of meaning and form which characterizes Hughes’s poem such as ‘Young Gal’s Blues’ is, of course characteristic of classic blues at its best and the literary sophistication is in fact made possible by the existence of songs such as Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues” (1926). “Young Gal’s Blues” in which a young woman tries to fortify herself against the prospect of death and the loneliness of old age, is an example of an oral form moving unchanged into literary tradition” (Williams 545)

Here’s an excerpt from ‘Young Gal’s Blues’:

*“I’m gonna walk to the graveyard  
 ‘Hind ma friend Miss Cora Lee.  
 Gonna walk to the graveyard  
 ‘Hind ma dear friend Cora Lee  
 Cause when I’m dead some  
 Body’ll have to walk behind me.”*

Hughes adds slight variations to the first line by dropping “I’m” in the repetition of the first half-line and adding “dear” when he repeats the second half line. Sherley Williams has observed that, “repetition in blues is seldom word for word and the definition of worrying the line includes changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases within the line itself and the wordless blues cries which often punctuate the performance of the songs.”

Another example is Hughes’s popular poem “Hard Daddy” which is written entirely in the AAB format. The last stanza of the poem is particularly interesting and can be compared and contrasted with the last stanza of Bessie Smith and Porter Grainger’s “Homeless Blues” (1927) –

*“I wish I had wings to  
 Fly like the eagle flies,  
 Wish I had wings to  
 Fly like the eagle flies.  
 I’d fly on ma man an’  
 I’d scratch out both his eyes.” (Hughes)*

*“Wish I was an eagle, but I’m a plain old black crow  
 Wish I was an eagle, but I’m a plain old black crow  
 I’m gonna flap my wings and leave here, and never come back no more!” (Smith/Grainger)*

Smith and Grainger’s lyric has used the flight of an eagle to symbolize strength and freedom. Both the lyric and poem reject passivity and there is an intense desire to improve or escape from one’s oppressive conditions. While “Homeless Blues” is more focussed on walking away from a ‘blues condition,’ Hughes uses the blues stock-phrase, “if I had wings” which also occurs in Peg Leg Howell’s “Turtle Dove Blues,” to bring out the ferocious nature

of an eagle. Hughes's poem has a sharper, threatening tone which is evident in the final two lines that express the desire to retaliate rather than escape.

From the above-mentioned examples and comparisons, it is evident that Hughes drew inspiration from blues musicians. The AAB stanza format and its variants, call and response patterns, the dialectic nature of blues music are an integral part of Hughes's early poems. Although he did reformulate and retune certain elements while bringing the blues oral tradition into the print medium, he remained true to the blues ethos. Hughes conveyed the social realities of the African-American community in a form and language that was uniquely thie own.

### **Travel, Rivers and Freedom**

Until the abolishment of slavery in America, a majority of the African-American people had been confined to the farms and plantations where they worked. "Travel was the risky prerogative of runaways and fugitives... when slavery was finally abolished, mobility was no longer proscribed by law and the black community was offered the historically new experience of embarking upon personal journeys." (Davis 67). Lawrence Levine has observed that, "spacial mobility was a particularly crucial symbol for Afro-Americans to whom it had been denied throughout the long years of slavery" (Levine 262). Freedom of movement, as Howard Thurman has argued, was for the African-Americans the "most psychologically dramatic of all manifestations of freedom." The need to move, the existence of places to go, and the ability to get there, constituted central motifs in blues songs after emancipation. This is a motif that is infused in early blues songs such as Ma Rainey's (1882-1939) 'Traveling Blues,' the lyric of the song is included here in its entirety –

*"Train's at the station, I heard the whistle blow  
The train's at the station, I heard the whistle blow  
I done bought my ticket and I don't know where I'll go*

*I went to the depot looked up and down the board  
I went to the depot looked up and down the board  
I asked the ticket agent "Is my town on this road?"*

*The ticket agent said "Woman, Don't sit and cry"  
The ticket agent said "Woman, Don't you sit and cry*



*The train blows at this station, but she keeps on passing by*

*I hear my daddy calling some other woman's name*

*I hear my daddy calling some other woman's name*

*I know he don't need me but I'm gonna answer just the same*

*I'm dangerous and blue, can't stay here no more*

*I'm dangerous and blue, can't stay here no more*

*Here come my train folks, and I've got to go."*

Peg Leg Howell, one of the earliest blues musicians to be recorded by Columbia Records in 1926, used to play on the streets of Atlanta, Georgia. His songs documented everyday hardships and in songs such as "Broke and Hungry Blues" and "Away From Home" he repeats the following lines –

*"Standin' at the station, waiting for my train*

*Standin' at the station, waiting for my train*

*I was out there, sleeping in the rain."*

Ma Rainey's "Traveling Blues" along with other blues songs such as Rainey's "Walking Blues" and "Runaway Blues", Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Booster Blues" and the infamous "Crossroads" by Robert Johnson, depict the ability to travel as a symbol of autonomy where the speaker has an active role in changing one's situation by traveling and thus escaping a life of mistreatment and injustice in the South. Consequently, for the first time, through blues lyrics, the notions of power, opportunity and control were introduced into the collective consciousness of the black slaves which later on became dominant themes in canonical literature of poets such as Langston Hughes.

Hughes's 'Bound No'th Blues' brings forward the trials and tribulations of a speaker who has set out on a lonely journey on the "no'thern road." Although the destination, at times, may be unknown, there is a choice to be made; that proverbial "ticket" out of the South has to be bought because the railroad tracks or Johnson's "Crossroads" represent a chance to walk away from violence and move towards something different and unexplored. The second stanza of Hughes's Bound No'th Blues reflects the same indomitable willpower to keep walking as Ma Rainey's Walking Blues (1923).

*“Road’s in front o’ me,  
Nothin’ to do but walk.  
Road’s in front of me,  
Walk...an’ walk...an’ walk.  
I’d like to meet a good friend  
To come along an’ talk.”* (Hughes)

*“Walked and walked till I,  
walked and walked ’  
til I almost lost my mind  
Walked and walked  
till I almost lost my mind  
I was afraid to stop walking ‘cause  
I might lose some time.”* (Rainey)

The loneliness of this exhausting and dangerous journey had grave psychological implications and yet the determination to undertake it exhibited a strong desire to shun passivity and reach for emancipation. The repetition of the verb ‘walk’ brings out the desperate need for mobility. After a long history of oppression and enslavement, for the first time, the African-American people had the ability to walk away from a “blues condition” as stated by Dr. Gussow, and the roads and railways represented this quest for freedom. Hughes’s poem ‘Mother to Son’ (1922) conveys the same need to keep moving ahead. The boy in the poem is directionless and is on the verge of giving up, however, the mother warns the son not to “set down.” ‘Mother to Son’ was composed during the peak of the Harlem Renaissance and the mother in the poem can be considered as the poet/blues artist who is interacting with the audience and motivating the masses to keep striving for a better life. Hughes’s “*po’ house*” or “*places with no carpet on the floor*” as well as Bessie Smith’s and Blind Lemon Jefferson’s ‘backwaters’ evoke social conditions of being uprooted and homeless, which are shared realities for the poet/blues artist and the audience.

### **Representation of Rivers**

"*Roll, Jordan, Roll*" was a spiritual created by African- American slaves. In the 19th century, it helped inspire blues music, and it remains a staple in gospel music. The River

Jordan of the song became a coded message for escape, calling to mind the Mississippi or Ohio Rivers, both of which led to the slave-free northern United States and thus freedom.

The Mississippi river frequently appears as a trope in African-American Literature. Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921) is the perfect example of this deep-rooted connection that the African-Americans share with rivers. The poem was written on a train on the back of an envelope when Hughes saw the Mississippi river outside of St. Louis, Missouri while travelling from Cleveland, Ohio to his father's place in Toluca, Mexico. Hughes states:

*"I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and  
Older than the flow of human blood in human veins."*

The poem is a bold attempt to comprehend what rivers, especially the Mississippi River means to the African-American people. Rivers like the Mississippi have a range of complicated experiences attached to them. Rivers have cradled civilizations but they have also uprooted the black community, they represent a nurturing as well as a destructive force (as expressed in blues songs about the Mississippi flood of 1927). Instead of air-brushing the dark connection between slave trade and rivers, Hughes uses it to forge a connection between the past and the present. The Mississippi was the lifeline of slave trade in the USA during the 1800s. Slaves were sold 'down the river' into New Orleans, the biggest slave-trade hub in America at that time. Being sold down the Mississippi, further into the heart of slavery was the worst fate that could befall a slave. The Mississippi later become a route to emancipation and a source of empowerment, a notion Hughes reinstates when he reminds his people how the muddy waters turned "golden in the sunset."

*"I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen  
its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset."*

There have been many artistic representation of the Mississippi river, but blues music is probably the most pervasive. Southern blues musicians like Bessie Smith, Peg Leg Howell

and Blind Lemon Jefferson offered a first-hand experience of the Mississippi. While some of their songs consider specific natural disasters such as the Mississippi Flood of 1927, others consider the river's relationship with labour, slavery, mobility or the lack of it. They also explored individual feelings towards the river. Songs such as "Homeless Blues" by Bessie Smith, "When the Levee Breaks" by Memphis Minnie or "Rising High Water Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson are examples of this tradition. Angela Davis explains that songs such as these "preserve a tragic moment in the history of African Americans. They also preserve and reflect a cultural consciousness that was capable of transforming such tragedies into catalytic events, rather than consigning them to historical memory as merely private misfortunes"

Blues music has always been inextricable from the socio-economic conditions in which it prevailed and it speaks on specific historical moments, events and feelings and this is especially true in terms of representations of rivers and roads and trains . These motifs that are unique to blues music played a crucial role in documenting and preserving the collective black experience in the face of slavery, oppression or natural disasters.

## **Conclusion**

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed the Great Migration and more than 175,000 African-Americans who had escaped from the South settled in Harlem alone. The early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century also witnessed the rise of the educated African-American middle-class which sought to distance itself from everything associated with black culture and art forms. Blues music was considered "low grade" and even satanic by this emerging elite for whom the blues musician represented the decadent side of being an African-American. Hughes dismantles these notions of the misguided bourgeois. He notes, "this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible."

According to blues scholar, Steven Tracy, it is "no coincidence that the commercial recording of blues music by African-American performers and the cultural/artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance began at roughly the same time." When Langston Hughes incorporated the AAB blues stanza in his poems, the African-American dialect and the quintessential blues motifs of travel, rivers and freedom, Hughes made the same assumption about his audience that a blues singer makes – both poet/singer and the audience share the

same reality. The call and response pattern of the blues stanza, the imagery of railroads, crossroads and rivers evokes memories, experiences and feelings that are simultaneously personal and collective. Stephen Henderson describes these as “mascon images – Afro-American archetypes which represent a massive concentration of black experiential energy.” “Often the mascons are not really images in the literal sense of the word, rather they are verbal expressions which evoke a powerful response in the listener because of their direct relationship to concepts and events in the collective experience.” (Williams 550)

When I started writing this paper, my aim was to examine the intricacies between blues music and Hughes’s poetry. It is a matter of common knowledge that Hughes was influenced by the blues and when approaching Hughes’s poems, this fact remains somewhere in the background with one or two sentences devoted to it while studying his poems. My aim has been to understand the exact ways in which Hughes drew inspiration from blues music and to understand why he chose the blues medium. As Angela Davis explains, “The blues as a genre marked a point in African-American historical development when black communities seemed open to all sorts of new possibilities. It was a musical form whose implied celebration of exploration and transformation held a special meaning for African-American people.”

Langston Hughes is considered the poet laureate of Harlem by the Afro-American people. In infusing his poems with the musical traditions and experiences of black slaves, Hughes made it clear that his poetry was committed, technically and artistically, to expressing the truth of the African-American community. In selecting the blues as a medium of poetic expression, Hughes made a bold cultural statement. Although he was heavily criticized for the use of ‘unpoetic’ language and labelled the poet “low-rate” of Harlem by some critics, Hughes remained deeply committed to his artistic vision. As Steve Tracy states, “his vision was modernistic – experimental, both spontaneous and improvisatory and thoughtfully and carefully crafted, at times primitivistic, disjunctive, and cacophonous, rejecting artificial middle-class values, promoting emotional and intellectual freedom”

In drawing inspiration from the collective African-American experience, Hughes composed poetry that was life-affirming, love-affirming as well as affirming of the African-American self and consequently showed that it was possible for an artist to have roots and wings. Studying Hughes’s poetry in connection with its blues influences has broadened and deepened my knowledge of his work and led to a firmer understanding of the African-American poetic tradition. The purpose of this paper is to propose that since Hughes’s poetry

is an extension of the blues musical form which has roots in folklore, an understanding of the African-American folk forms such as the spirituals, gospel, jazz and blues music will affect and influence the interpretation of the texts. This paper is also an attempt to acknowledge the contribution of blues musicians like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith amongst others who laid the foundation of the African-American aesthetics upon which the canon of African-American literature was firmly established. The uprooted, travelling blues musician has received minimal attention from scholars and critics. The blues song tradition was marginalized for being an unpolished, shabby art form of an illiterate people, unworthy of study in university classrooms. I believe it would be a very blinkered approach if Hughes's poetry, or for that matter, African-American poetry and literature is studied without a firm understanding of blues music and the blues ethos. The aim of this paper is to recognize the efforts of the blues musician, who, in times of oppression, chaos and confusion served as an anchor to the black people and played a pivotal role in shaping the African-American aesthetic and identity. By drawing inspiration from the blues bards and troubadours, Hughes continued their tradition and transported it from the plantations and juke-joints into poetry journals. Hughes's poetry is a recollection, revival and reinterpretation of the blues oral form; and one can appreciate it holistically when one arrives at his poems by travelling 'down the road' that was taken by Hughes as well many blues musicians before him.

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