The Weary Blues

📄 SUMMARY

Playing a sleepy, ragged song, rocking back and forth, and singing in a calm, soft voice, I heard a black man perform. This was on Lenox Avenue a few nights ago. He was playing in the dim light from an old gas lamp. He swayed lazily on the piano bench. He swayed lazily to the tune of the tired blues he played. With his black hands on the white keys, he made that old piano sing mournfully. Oh blues! Rocking back and forth on a rickety stool, he played that sad ragtime tune like someone drunk with music. Lovely blues music, coming from the soul of a black man. Oh blues! In a low, sad voice, I heard that black man sing, the piano accompanying him: "I don't have anyone in the world. I don't have anyone but myself. I'm going to stop being sad and get rid of my troubles.

His foot thumped, thumped, thumped on the floor; he played some chords on the piano and then kept singing: "I have the weary blues and I can't be content. I've got the weary blues and I can't be content. I'm not happy anymore: I wish that I was dead." He sang that song late into the night, until the stars went dark and the moon did too. He stopped playing and went to bed, while the weary blues music kept playing in his head. He slept as deeply as a rock or a dead man.

⊕ THEMES

🎹 THE PAIN AND BEAUTY OF BLACK ART

"The Weary Blues" is about the power and pain of black art. The poem describes a black blues singer playing in a bar in Harlem late into the night, whose music channels the pain of living in a racist society. For the speaker, this music is a kind of relief: the speaker finds it soothing, even healing, to hear such sorrow transformed into song. But it doesn't have the same effect on the blues singer himself, for whom channeling so much pain and suffering is exhausting. This tension allows the poem to reflect on both oppression and creativity: it suggests how marginalized people may find solace and power in art, without shying away from how emotionally taxing that creative process can be. In other words, it honors the beauty of black art while also acknowledging the weight of the pain that led to its creation.

For the speaker of "The Weary Blues," the blues is more than just music—it conveys the suffering and injustice that black people have endured living in a racist society. The music that the speaker hears is full of pain, and described as both "melancholy" and "sad." Even the piano that the blues singer plays seems to "moan"—as though it were crying out in anguish.

As the speaker notes in line 15, this music comes "from a black man's soul." The pain it expresses is thus specifically tied to the pain of the black experience and to the trials of life in a racist society. Its pleasure thus comes from the way it negotiates and transforms that pain.

Listening to the blues singer, the speaker experiences a kind of relief and release. Throughout the first stanza, he cries out, "O Blues!" and "Sweet Blues!" In these moments, the music seems to transport the speaker, eliciting cries of rapture and pleasure. Music offers both an acknowledgment of and an escape from the speaker's own troubles—which may explain why the speaker is so absorbed in the performance. In this way, the poem subtly suggests that musical traditions like the blues help black people resist and endure racism.

But the poem is also attentive to the costs of making and playing such painful music. The singer does not share in the speaker's release. When the blues singer gets home after playing all night, he sleeps "like a rock or a man that's dead." Literally speaking, the simile just suggests that the singer is very tired—and that he sleeps deeply. But the simile's implications and undertones are a bit darker. They suggest that, for the blues singer, it's so painful and difficult to play this music that, by the time he's done, he's almost dead. Expressing his pain has, in a way, been sucking the life out of him.

"The Weary Blues" thus celebrates the blues as a way of expressing black suffering and as a means of escaping and resisting a racist society. But it also carefully documents the costs of such resistance—the way that it drains and diminishes the artists who channel and express such suffering. Further, "The Weary Blues" isn't just a description of blues music: the poem itself takes on the form and rhythms of the blues. In writing the poem, Hughes mines the suffering of his community—and takes the weight of that suffering on himself. At the same time, he offers the poem as a source of celebration and pleasure, perhaps hoping the reader will experience the same relief and release that the speaker does.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> • Lines 1-35

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Droning a drowsy ...
... a Negro play.

The first three lines of "The Weary Blues" introduce the reader

to the poem's setting—and hint at its themes. The speaker is listening to a black blues singer play a "drowsy syncopated tune." In other words, he's playing a slow, jazzy song—rocking back and forth as he does so in time with the music.

The poem not only describes the blues singer and his song—it takes on the distinctive rhythm and mood of blues music. In a sense, the poem *becomes* a piece of blues music. The speaker relies on a range of different formal techniques and poetic devices to achieve this. Note, for instance, the way the poem uses alliteration and consonance in lines 1 and 2 to establish the poem's rhythm:

> **Dr**oning a **dr**owsy syncopated tune,
> **Ro**c**k**ing ba**ck** and fo**r**th to a mellow **cr**oon…

The alliterative /d/ sounds in line 1 sound like the tinkling of piano keys, an improvisatory run before the song gets started. The /r/ and /ck/ sounds themselves rock back and forth, establishing a syncopated, swinging rhythm for the poem. And the three lines together work like the introduction to the song—building anticipation until, in line 3, the speaker arrives at a straightforward, satisfying statement: "I heard a Negro play." (Note that, to build such anticipation, the speaker withholds the main verb of the sentence, "heard," until line 3.)

The poem thus doesn't follow a set form—like the sonnet or the villanelle. Instead, it uses its formal elements to help it imitate a blues song. It has no set meter or rhyme scheme—though many of its lines, including lines 1 and 2 form rhyming couplets. Indeed, the poem implicitly rejects European, white, formal techniques. The poem works from the example of the blues—a form of popular music developed by black Americans in the Deep South. It thus makes an implicit argument about the value of black artistic traditions: they are as rich, sophisticated, and accomplished as any European forms.

LINES 4-8

> *Down on Lenox …*
> *… those Weary Blues.*

In lines 4-8, the speaker continues to describe listening to a blues singer. In these lines, the speaker focuses on the setting, the place where the blues singer is playing. First, the speaker locates it in a specific neighborhood, in a specific city: "on Lenox Avenue." Now called Malcolm X Boulevard, Lenox Avenue was a major thoroughfare running through Harlem—a predominantly black neighborhood in New York City.

During the 1920s, Harlem was in many ways the heart of black life in New York. As black Americans from the South moved North in search of more freedom and economic opportunities, they congregated in Harlem—indeed, they were frequently not allowed to live anywhere else. The resulting concentration of black artists and intellectuals jump-started the "Harlem Renaissance"—a key 20th century artistic movement that

championed black art, literature, and music.

That's all to say that the speaker's choice of setting is significant. The speaker places the blues singer at the heart of black culture during the 1920s, in the midst of a vibrant, vital neighborhood. But the speaker is also quick to note the way racism and segregation press down on this vibrancy. The club where the blues singer plays is run-down and out of date. For instance, it is lit by an "old gas light"—a gas burning lamp—long after New York City was electrified. The lamp casts only a "pale dull pallor" over the stage. (The dullness of the light is emphasized by the soft, consonant /l/ sounds that run through the line—giving the line a blurred, fuzzy feel, just like the light in the club). This serves as a subtle reminder of the tough living conditions in Harlem in the 1920s, overcrowded, neglected by the city government, and out-of-date.

These lines continue to describe the blues singer's song. The speaker notes how he "sway[s]" with the "tune." And they also continue to imitate his song, taking on the rhythm and the mood of the blues. For instance, the speaker starts line 4 with another alliterative /d/ sound, "**D**own"—the same alliteration that appears in line 1, in "**D**roning" and "**d**rowsy." The alliterations thus serve as a kind of refrain, announcing the start of each of the poem's sentences. And the speaker also uses an actual refrain here, repeating the line "He did a lazy sway…" Lines 6-7 thus feel like the chorus of a blues song—a feeling which is enhanced by their end-stops, which gives them the strength and definitiveness of a good chorus.

The speaker thus continues to use the form of the poem to imitate the blues—instead of following the demands of a white, European poetic tradition. That's also evident in the way the poem uses rhyme. Many of its lines are in rhyming couplets—like lines 4 and 5, for instance. But the speaker interrupts those rhymes as it suits him or her. Line 3, for instance, rhymes with lines 6-7, not line 4—as one would expect for a poem written in rhyming couplets. And line 8 doesn't rhyme at all. In this way, the poem imitates the formal looseness and freedom of the blues, abandoning the strict standards of white poetics.

LINES 9-13

> *With his ebony …*
> *… a musical fool.*

In lines 9-13, the speaker continues to describe the blues singer and his song. The speaker begins by describing his black ("ebony") hands, working on the white ("ivory") keys of the piano. The contrast between his black hands and the white keys serves to emphasize the blues singer's blackness—and to remind the reader that the speaker is describing a distinctively African American art form, one that emerges from the long and difficult history of slavery and racism in American.

The music that the blues singer plays expresses the pain and suffering of that history. As the speaker notes in line 10, the

singer makes the "poor piano moan with melody." This a metaphor: the speaker is saying that the blues singer plays with such sorrow and passion that it sounds like the piano is moaning in sympathy with him and his pain. The alliteration in the line underlines the connection between the music and the pain it expresses: linking together "poor" and "piano," "melody" and "moan." The speaker also uses assonance to compliment this association, with the /o/ sound in "piano," "moan," and "melody."

In line 11, the speaker interjects, "O Blues!" This seems to be an expression of release and relief. Though the music contains a lot of pain, the speaker experiences it as a source of solace—solace so intense that it causes the speaker to cry out. These interjections (which return in lines 14 and 16) subtly suggests that, for the speaker, the music allows a certain escape from his or her troubles. Assuming that the speaker is black—as most critics have—the reader could interpret this as an escape from the pain and struggle of racism itself.

At this point in the poem, it's hard to tell whether the blues singer also experiences this relief and release as well. Regardless, he is deeply invested in the music, swaying back forth, playing "that sad raggy tune" with so much passion that the speaker describes him as a "musical fool." With this simile, the speaker isn't saying that the blues singer is silly or stupid. Instead, the speaker is saying that he's a fool *for* his music—deeply passionate about it, even drunk on it.

The form of the poem continues to reflect the speaker's desire to imitate the blues. Lines 9-10 and lines 12-13 both feel like musical phrases. The enjambments in lines 9 ("... key / He made ...") and 12 ("... stool / He played ...") strengthen that feeling. Because they're enjambed, the lines feel incomplete until the end of the next lines, lines 10 and 13 respectively. Those lines feel like the completion of a musical phrase—like the resolution of a dissonant chord. And even the interjection in line 11, "O Blues!" feels musical—like the passionate cry of a singer.

LINES 14-18

Sweet Blues! ...
... old piano moan—

Lines 14-18 continue to describe the blues singer's song—and they showcase the speaker's reaction to that song. In lines 14 and 16, the speaker cries out, "Sweet Blues!" and "O Blues!" Along with line 11, these interjections feel like an expression of intense emotion. These phrases are characterized by both anaphora and epistrophe: "O" is repeated at the beginning of lines 11 and 16, and "Blues" is repeated at the ends of lines 11, 14, and 16. These repetitions heighten the emotion of the lines. The speaker is overcome by the pain and power of the music and cries out in response.

However, the speaker's primary emotion seems to be relief. The intense emotional experience of listening to this music helps alleviate the speaker's own troubles and anxieties. If the reader

assumes that the speaker is black, as many readers do, then the reader can see the speaker making an implicit argument about the power of black art: it helps the speaker survive the pain and difficulty of life in a racist society.

Indeed, these lines powerfully align the blues with the suffering of African Americans. In line 15, the speaker describes the music as "Coming from a black man's soul." In other words, the music expresses the pain and traumas of the black experience, from slavery through Jim Crow. And the blues singer himself channels all that pain and suffering, pouring it into his music. Thus the speaker notes the "melancholy tone" of his voice—and, repeating almost exactly one of the poem's earlier phrases, the way he makes his "old piano moan."

Notably, line 18 is one of the few lines in the poem that contains a caesura ("... sing, that old piano ..."). It's easy to see why the speaker avoids caesura. After all, the speaker is trying to imitate a blues song—and it's hard to put a caesura in the middle of a line of song. It would be awkward, breaking up the rhythm. When the speaker does use a caesura, here, it helps accentuate the poem's music: the parallel phrases, "that Negro sing," and "that old piano moan" are rhythmic, driving.

Throughout these lines, the speaker continues to follow the impulse and model of blues music, rather than a predetermined formal scheme. While lines 17-18 are rhyming couplets ("tone"/"moan"), line 15 doesn't rhyme at all. And lines 14 and 16 simply repeat the word "Blues" at the end of the line—an instance of epistrophe technically, not rhyme. That gives these lines the feeling of a breakdown in a blues song, a momentary shift in the rhythm of the song, before things snap back in lines 17-18.

LINES 19-22

"Ain't got nobody ...
... on the shelf."

Through the first 18 lines of "The Weary Blues," the speaker has been imitating the distinctive rhythms and moods of the blues, turning the poem itself into a blues song. In lines 19-22, the speaker switches tacks. Instead of imitating the blues, the speaker quotes the blues singer directly, transcribing the lyrics of his song. These lyrics express suffering and loneliness: the blues singer complains about having "nobody in all this world ... but ma self."

However, he refuses to endure such loneliness: he ends by announcing that he's going to "put ma troubles on the shelf." "Troubles" here are both literal and symbolic. On the one hand, the singer is referring to the loneliness and isolation he feels. But, more broadly, he is referring to the loneliness and isolation of African Americans in the early twentieth century, who were deprived of their rights and political power. His resolution to "put ma troubles on the shelf" is thus potentially rebellious—an announcement of resistance to American racism. However, he expresses it in a metaphor, perhaps trying to disguise this

rebelliousness from his oppressors.

Blues songs often employ highly repetitive lyrics, and these lines are no exception. The starts of lines 19-20 ("Ain't got nobody") repeat each other exactly—an instance of anaphora. And these lines also follow the rhyme scheme of a blues song, rhyming ABCB. There is no evidence that these lines are lifted from a real blues song—rather, they are Langston Hughes's invention. But as he created them, he paid careful attention to the way real blues songs actually work, precisely recreating their rhythm, rhymes, and repetitions.

LINES 23-24

Thump, thump, thump, …
… sang some more—

The speaker ended the first stanza of "The Weary Blues" by quoting directly from the blues singer's song. In the second stanza, the speaker will quote even more lyrics from the blues singer's song. But the stanza begins with the singer in a kind of musical interlude: he's "play[ing] a few chords" before he "[sings] some more." The speaker takes this musical interlude as an opportunity to interject another quick description of the singer.

As he plays his song, he stomps his foot on the floor to keep the beat: "thump, thump, thump." This is an instance onomatopoeia: the word "thump" sounds like the noise the speaker's foot makes as it pounds against the stage. So this is another moment where the poem doesn't just describe the blues, it becomes a blues song itself: instead of simply describing the sound of the singer's foot, the speaker captures it, puts it directly into the poem. This is also one of the few places where the poem uses caesura: each instance of the word "thump" is separated from the others by a caesura. Here the caesuras emphasize the separation between each beat, making each "thump" clear, crisp, and distinct. Once again, the poem uses caesura to emphasize its musicality, to help it imitate the rhythms of blues music.

And these lines do a good job showing off the flexibility of the poem's rhythm. Line 23 starts with three strongly stressed syllables. But after this beginning, they slide back into an easy rhythm:

Thump, thump, thump, went his **foot** on the **floor.**

Additionally, lines 23 and 24 have a similar number of syllables (9-10) and rhyme with each other, forming a rhyming couplet ("floor"/"more"). Though they can't be scanned in any established meter, they still feel like they have a strong steady rhythm: a back beat that drives them forward.

LINES 25-30

"I got the …
… I had died."

In lines 25-30, the speaker once again quotes the blues singer's song directly, transcribing his lyrics. In the previous quote (in lines 19-22) the singer expressed a sense of loneliness and, potentially, rebelliousness. Lines 25-30 find him in a similarly melancholy mood. He has the "Weary Blues"—he's exhausted and sad. And, he "can't be satisfied"—nothing brings him pleasure or contentment. He ends, in lines 29-30, in despair: he "ain't happy no mo'." He even wishes that he "had died." His song thus expresses deep suffering and hopelessness: he sees no way out of his sadness. The potential rebelliousness of line 22 has disappeared.

Like lines 19-22, lines 25-30 are attentive to the blues, the way the lyrics of blues songs tend to involve careful, sustained repetitions. Lines 25 and 27 and lines 26-28 repeat each other almost exactly—there's only the smallest variations between them. Through these repetitions, they become refrains. Lines 26 and 28 are both end-stopped, which makes them feel like the conclusions of musical phrases.

As in lines 19-22, the poem once again plays close attention to the rhyme schemes that blues songs use: these lines rhyme ABABCB. As a result of this close attention to the formal conventions of the blues lyrics, this quotation from a fictional blues singer feels authentic and convincing—giving the reader the sense that they're listening to a real blues song.

LINES 31-35

And far into …
… man that's dead.

For the first 30 lines of "The Weary Blues," the poem and the blues song that it describes are more or less in sync with each other—the speaker is describing the song in realtime, as it's happening. In lines 31-35, however, the speaker pulls back a little bit, splits off from the blues song. Instead of describing the rest of the song, the speaker describes the rest of the evening: how "far into the night he crooned that tune"; how he only went home to sleep when the "stars" and the "moon" had gone out.

As the speaker describes the rest of the evening, he or she subtly hints at the costs associated with playing the blues. While the blues provides release and relief for the speaker, it seems to drain and diminish the blues singer. The reader gets a hint of that in line 32: the "stars" and "moon" are traditional symbols of hope, beauty, and guidance. Those symbols disappear from the blues singer's life when the "stars" and "moon" go out—and nothing compensates him for their loss. (Note that the speaker does *not* describe the sun rising to take their place, to provide its light.) Related to these symbols, the metaphor of the stars and moon going "out" suggests that the singer has lost hope, has fallen into despair.

Further, in line 34, the speaker describes how the blues singer is pursued by his song: it "echo[es] through his head." He can't seem to escape from it. The assonant /oo/ sound that runs through the final five lines of the poem, in words like "tune,"

"moon," and "blues," captures this echo, giving the reader a sense of the way it persists. Finally, in line 35, the speaker uses a simile to describe how the blues singer sleeps: "like a rock or a man that's dead." The simile has multiple levels. On one level, it simply indicates how tired he is. But on another level, it suggests that he's lost some of his humanity, becoming like an inanimate object or even a dead person.

The price of playing the blues is high: it leaves the blues singer in despair, almost dead. In this way, the poem hints at the complexities that attend black art. On one hand, music like the blues is capable of capturing black pain and suffering—and it can even offer its listeners a sense of relief and release from racism. On the other, channeling all that pain can be dangerous and detrimental for the musicians who do so.

As the poem comes to a close, its form shifts in subtle ways. These lines are written in a rhyming couplet and a rhyming tercet: AABBB. This marks the only place in the poem—at least the parts of the poem that are in the speaker's voice—where the speaker sustains a run of rhymes for more than two lines without an interjection and interruption. These lines also use less alliteration, assonance and consonance than the rest of the poem. That makes them feel more relaxed, less tense and musical—almost like the coda to a blues song.

⚘ SYMBOLS

⭐ STARS

Stars are traditional symbols of hope and guidance. For instance, sailors have historically used the stars to help them navigate on their voyages. They used stars to locate themselves on a dark and threatening ocean. So when the speaker says that the "stars went out" as the blues singer walked home in line 32, that's a sign that things aren't going well: the blues singer is traveling in the dark, without the hope or guidance that the stars usually provide. (Note that the speaker *doesn't* describe the sun rising.) The speaker thus uses the symbol to suggest that the blues singer is trapped in deep, unrelenting darkness, with no way out. In turn, this suggests how costly it is, how painful to make the art that he does. Reflecting and channeling so much pain has deprived him of hope.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:
- **Line 32:** "stars"

🌙 THE MOON

Like the stars, the "moon" is a traditional symbol of hope—and of beauty. Poets often appeal to the moon because it seems so distant from their struggles and suffering.

It's literally above the human world, and it literally looks down on human problems. The moon thus often proves reassuring: as much sorrow and pain as a poet experiences on earth, he or she can be sure that there is *something* out there that's above it all, unaffected and supremely beautiful.

But the blues singer lacks that consolation: in line 32 the "moon" goes out. In other words, the moon—and all the beauty and hope it symbolizes—disappears from his life. This suggests some of the costs associated with his art. He channels black pain and suffering, transforming it into beautiful music—but at a price. Doing so seriously damages him, leaves him in a world that has no outlet, no escape, and no hope.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:
- **Line 32:** "moon"

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Weary Blues" uses end-stop often, though not in any particular pattern. Instead, the poem's end-stops reflect and reinforce its own music and sense of rhythm. In other words, the poem uses end-stop to help it imitate the distinctive sound and feeling of the blues. The device helps the poem do more than simply describe a blues song: it helps the poem *become* a blues song in its own right.

One can hear the music of the poem's end-stops in lines 6-7:

> He did a lazy sway...
> He did a lazy sway...

Both lines are end-stopped—indeed, the lines are identical, repeating each other exactly. They serve as refrains, almost like the chorus of a pop-song. The end-stops make the lines sound definite, contained, even iconic: they give the lines all the punch and definition that a really good chorus needs.

Similarly, in the blues singer's song, he uses end-stop to mark the ends of musical phrases. Note the way that lines 26 and 28 are both end-stopped:

> I got the Weary Blues
> And I can't be satisfied.
> Got the Weary Blues
> And can't be satisfied.

Lines 25 and 27 introduce a phrase; lines 26 and 28 complete it and close it off. This stable structure emphasizes the repetition of words and phrases in these lines, making them even more musical. The poem's end-stops thus bring out the music of the poem's language—and, in that way, help the speaker imitate the

rhythm and feel of the blues.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tune,"
- **Line 2:** "croon,"
- **Line 3:** "play."
- **Line 6:** "sway...."
- **Line 7:** "sway...."
- **Line 8:** "Blues."
- **Line 10:** "melody."
- **Line 11:** "Blues!"
- **Line 13:** "fool."
- **Line 14:** "Blues!"
- **Line 15:** "soul."
- **Line 16:** "Blues!"
- **Line 18:** "moan—"
- **Line 19:** "world,"
- **Line 20:** "self."
- **Line 21:** "frownin'"
- **Line 22:** "shelf.""
- **Line 23:** "floor."
- **Line 24:** "more—"
- **Line 26:** "satisfied."
- **Line 28:** "satisfied—"
- **Line 30:** "died.""
- **Line 31:** "tune."
- **Line 32:** "moon."
- **Line 34:** "head."
- **Line 35:** "dead."

ENJAMBMENT

"The Weary Blues" uses enjambment throughout—but not in an obviously planned or predetermined way. The speaker's unpredictable use of enjambment helps to create and reinforce the poem's musical feel, allowing the speaker to imitate the rhythms of blues music.

For instance, lines 4 and 5 are both enjambed:

> Down on Lenox Avenue the other **night**
> **By** the pale dull pallor of an old gas **light**
> **He** did a lazy sway....

These lines build up the anticipation. They are all one sentence, but the reader doesn't get to the actual subject that sentence ("He") and what that person did ("a lazy sway") until line 6. With their tinkling consonance and assonance (note the /d/, /l/, and long /i/ sounds) combined with this long delay, these lines feel like a piano introduction to a blues song, the piano player indulging in elaborate runs up and down the keys before finally starting the song in earnest. The enjambments are crucial to building that sense of anticipation and virtuosic improvisation, all of it building toward a simple, straightforward declaration:

"He did a lazy sway..."

Later in the poem, the enjambments play a more regulated, rhythmic role. Many of the poem's rhyming couplets use enjambments in their first line. In lines 9-10, the speaker says:

> With his ebony hands on each ivory **key**
> **He** made that poor piano moan with melody.

And in lines 12-13, the speaker says:

> Swaying to and fro on his rickety **stool**
> **He** played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

The enjambments in lines 9 and 12 make those lines feel incomplete—and they continue to feel that way until the ends of the following lines (lines 10 and 13).

This makes the ends of those lines feel all the more powerful and definite, their rhymes become especially strong. In short, the enjambments make the lines that follow feel like the completion of a musical phrase—the resolution of a dissonant chord or the completion of a syncopated measure. The speaker thus uses enjambment to emphasize the poem's musicality, to make the poem feel like it's a blues song.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "night / By"
- **Lines 5-6:** "light /   He"
- **Lines 9-10:** "key / He"
- **Lines 12-13:** "stool / He"
- **Lines 17-18:** "tone / I"
- **Lines 25-26:** "Blues /   And"
- **Lines 27-28:** "Blues /   And"
- **Lines 29-30:** "mo' /   And"
- **Lines 33-34:** "bed / While"

CAESURA

"The Weary Blues" doesn't use caesura often—in fact, there are only two lines that even have caesuras, lines 18 and 23. That's surprising for a poem as long as "The Weary Blues." The relative absence of caesuras in "The Weary Blues" reflects the speaker's commitment to imitating the blues. In a song, caesuras are much less frequent: after all, song lyrics are primarily sung. Because singers have to keep in time with the music, a break in the middle of a line can end up sounding awkward. As such, the speaker seems to be avoiding using caesura to give the poem the rhythm and cadence of a blues song.

Further, the caesuras that do appear in the poem don't disrupt the poem's musicality. Instead, they enhance it. In line 18, the caesura separates two parallel phrases, emphasizing the rhythm of their repetition:

I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—

Here, the caesura captures the parallel structure of the line, emphasizing its musicality. And in line 23, the caesuras separate three [onomatopoeic](link) repetitions of the word *thump*: "Thump, thump, thump." The speaker is using language here to mimic the sound of the blues singer's foot pounding against the stage to keep time. The caesuras emphasize the rhythm of the language, the way each "thump" marks a strong, separate beat. Thus, when the speaker does use caesura, the device doesn't hamper or interrupt the poem's close imitation of blues music—it accentuates it.

> **Where Caesura appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 18:** "sing, that"
> - **Line 23:** "Thump, thump, thump, went"

ALLITERATION

"The Weary Blues" uses a lot of [alliteration](link). Throughout the poem, the reader finds strong alliterative sounds—sometimes many such sounds in the same line. The speaker turns to alliteration to help make the poem sound musical. Alliteration is central to the poem: one of the key devices which the speaker relies on to help his poem not only describe the blues, but sound like a piece of blues music. Through alliteration, in other words, the speaker transforms his poem into a blues song.

For instance, note the alliterative /d/ sound in line 1:

> Droning a drowsy syncopated tune…

Here, the alliteration sounds like the tinkling of piano keys—a little showy run on the keys before the player settles down and starts the song. The same alliterative sound appears at the start of line 4:

> Down on Lenox Avenue the other night…

Ordinarily, these lines would be too far apart to hear alliteration between them. But the structure of the sentences in this part of the poem encourages the reader to hear connections that might not otherwise be noticeable. The first three lines of the poem are all one sentence, starting in line 1 with "Droning a drowsy…" and running to the end of line 3 "I heard a Negro play." Those three lines thus constitute a kind of single musical phrase; line 4 marks the start of a new musical phrase. So the alliterative /d/ sound at the start of the line, "Down on…" almost functions like a little [refrain](link), which introduces each phrase—binding together the poem and amplifying its musicality.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses alliteration more pointedly: it not only makes the poem feel musical, it also reinforces the poem's

argument about black art. Note for instance the alliterative /m/ and /p/ sounds in line 10:

> He made that poor piano moan with melody.

The alliterations link together "poor" and "piano," "moan" and "melody"—so that the music the blues singer makes is inseparably joined to suffering and struggle. Alliteration thus not only helps the poem take on the music of the blues: it also helps the speaker explore the suffering and pain that underlie blues music and make it powerful.

> **Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 1:** "D," "d"
> - **Line 3:** "N"
> - **Line 4:** "D," "L," "n"
> - **Line 5:** "p," "d," "p," "l"
> - **Line 6:** "H," "d," "l," "sw"
> - **Line 7:** "H," "d," "l," "sw"
> - **Line 8:** "T," "th," "t," "th"
> - **Line 9:** "h," "h"
> - **Line 10:** "m," "p," "p," "m," "m"
> - **Line 12:** "S," "r," "s"
> - **Line 13:** "r," "m"
> - **Line 14:** "S," "B"
> - **Line 15:** "b," "m," "s"
> - **Line 16:** "B"
> - **Line 17:** "s," "m"
> - **Line 18:** "s," "m"
> - **Line 19:** "Ai," "g," "n"
> - **Line 20:** "Ai," "g," "n," "m"
> - **Line 21:** "m"
> - **Line 22:** "m"
> - **Line 23:** "Th," "th," "th," "f," "f"
> - **Line 24:** "f," "s," "s"
> - **Line 25:** "g," "W," "B"
> - **Line 26:** "c," "b," "s"
> - **Line 27:** "G," "W," "B"
> - **Line 28:** "c," "b," "s"
> - **Line 29:** "h"
> - **Line 30:** "w," "h"
> - **Line 32:** "s," "s"
> - **Line 33:** "s," "s," "b"
> - **Line 34:** "Wh," "W," "B," "h," "h"
> - **Line 35:** "H"

ASSONANCE

As a poem, "The Weary Blues" doesn't just describe a blues song—it becomes a piece of blues music itself. The speaker uses the sound of the poem to make this happen: [alliteration](link), [assonance](link), and [consonance](link) all contribute to the feeling that the poem itself is a piece of music. Alliteration plays the key role

here: it is often prominent in the poem, directly and forcefully shaping the reader's experience. Assonance tends to play a supporting role, reinforcing the musicality of the poem's alliterations, adding its own flourishes.

For example, take a look at the interplay between alliteration and assonance in line 10, with its alliterative /m/ and /p/ sounds and its assonant /o/ sound:

> He made that poor piano moan with melody

The alliterations remind the reader that, for the speaker, the majesty and accomplishment of black art can't be separated from the suffering that goes into it—"moan" can't be separated from "melody." But, at the same time, the assonance reminds the reader not to lose track of the blues' majesty and accomplishment. Assonance acts like a little musical flourish, a moment of pure sonic pleasure, that shows how powerful, accomplished, and sophisticated the blues is.

As the poem ends, the assonance begins to slip out of the poem—almost as though its music were relaxing, its intensity ebbing, as the blues singer heads home after a long night playing. But there is still a strong assonant /oo/ sound that runs through lines 31-35, appearing in "crooned," "tune," "moon," "Blues" and "through." As this assonant sound echoes through these final lines, it gives the reader a sense of what the blues singer hears in his head, the "echoe[s]" of the "Weary Blues" that follow him all the way home. The assonance here serves not only to reflect and amplify the poem's music, it also subtly reminds the reader of the costs of making such music.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "u"
- **Line 2:** "o," "oo"
- **Line 3:** "o"
- **Line 4:** "ue," "i"
- **Line 5:** "y," "a," "a," "a," "a," "i"
- **Line 6:** "e," "i," "a," "ay"
- **Line 7:** "e," "i," "a," "ay"
- **Line 8:** "o," "u"
- **Line 9:** "i," "e," "y," "ea," "y," "ey"
- **Line 10:** "e," "o," "o," "o," "y"
- **Line 11:** "ue"
- **Line 12:** "ay," "o," "oo"
- **Line 13:** "ay," "a," "a," "u," "oo"
- **Line 14:** "ue"
- **Line 15:** "o," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 17:** "ee," "y," "o"
- **Line 18:** "e," "o," "i," "o," "i," "o," "oa"
- **Line 19:** "Ai," "o," "o," "o," "y," "a"
- **Line 20:** "Ai," "o," "o," "o," "y," "a"
- **Line 21:** "I," "i," "i," "a," "i"
- **Line 22:** "a"

- **Line 23:** "u," "u," "u"
- **Line 24:** "a," "a"
- **Line 25:** "o," "ea," "y," "ue"
- **Line 26:** "a," "e," "a," "ie"
- **Line 27:** "o," "ea," "y," "ue"
- **Line 28:** "a," "e," "a," "ie"
- **Line 29:** "o," "o"
- **Line 30:** "I," "I," "ie"
- **Line 31:** "o," "oo," "u"
- **Line 32:** "oo"
- **Line 33:** "e," "e"
- **Line 34:** "ue," "e," "ou," "ea"
- **Line 35:** "e," "a," "a," "ea"

CONSONANCE

"The Weary Blues" is a poem that imitates music. The speaker uses devices like alliteration, assonance, and consonance to give the poem the distinctive rhythm and feel of the blues. Alliteration plays the lead role here, often supplemented by consonance, which adds an extra burst of sound that reinforces the poem's musicality.

Note, for instance, the /r/ and /c/ sounds in line 2:

> Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon.

The alternation between these two sounds gives the line a steady beat—like the backbeat that supports a blues song. It's not a loud, obvious moment, but it contributes subtly to the poem's musicality.

Elsewhere, the speaker turns to consonance to underline his description of the run-down bar where the blues singer plays. Note the strong consonant /l/ sound in line 5:

> By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light...

The /l/ sounds blur together: the sound of the line is soft, fuzzy, a little out of focus. Its sound parallels the thing it describes: a poorly lit room, a run-down, out-of-date space. In this way, the consonance helps convey to the reader how the space feels. And in that way, it helps the speaker make his or her broader point: that the blues singer is capable of making great art even in this run-down space.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "D," "r," "d," "r," "t," "t"
- **Line 2:** "R," "ck," "ck," "r," "cr," "n"
- **Line 3:** "r," "N," "r," "l"
- **Line 4:** "D," "n," "L," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 5:** "p," "l," "d," "ll," "p," "ll," "l," "d," "l"
- **Line 6:** "H," "d," "d," "l," "sw"

- **Line 7:** "H," "d," "d," "l," "sw"
- **Line 8:** "T," "th," "t," "th," "W"
- **Line 9:** "h," "n," "h," "n"
- **Line 10:** "m," "p," "p," "n," "m," "n," "m," "l"
- **Line 11:** "l"
- **Line 12:** "t," "r," "t," "t," "l"
- **Line 13:** "l," "t," "r," "t," "l," "m," "l," "l"
- **Line 14:** "S," "Bl"
- **Line 15:** "m," "m," "l," "m," "s," "l"
- **Line 16:** "Bl"
- **Line 17:** "s," "m," "n," "n"
- **Line 18:** "N," "s," "n," "m," "n"
- **Line 19:** "n," "t," "t," "n," "b," "d," "n," "ll," "l," "d"
- **Line 20:** "n," "t," "t," "n," "b," "d," "b," "t," "m," "l"
- **Line 21:** "t," "m," "r," "n," "n"
- **Line 22:** "t," "m," "t," "r"
- **Line 23:** "Th," "mp," "th," "mp," "th," "mp," "n," "t," "f," "t," "n," "f," "l"
- **Line 24:** "l," "f," "r," "s," "s," "m," "m," "r"
- **Line 25:** "g," "t," "W," "r," "Bl," "s"
- **Line 26:** "c," "t," "b," "s," "t," "sf"
- **Line 27:** "G," "t," "W," "r," "Bl," "s"
- **Line 28:** "c," "t," "b," "s," "t," "sf"
- **Line 29:** "t," "h"
- **Line 30:** "t," "h," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 31:** "r," "n," "t," "n," "t," "r," "n," "t," "t," "n"
- **Line 32:** "t," "t," "t," "s," "n"
- **Line 33:** "s," "st," "l," "t," "t," "d"
- **Line 34:** "Wh," "W," "l," "h," "h," "d"
- **Line 35:** "l," "l," "k," "ck," "d," "d"

METAPHOR

"The Weary Blues" is generally a straightforward, literal poem. It describes a real scene. It tries to convey as directly as possible the experience of being in the bar, listening to a blues singer. So it mostly avoids [metaphor](link). But the speaker—and the blues singer—do use metaphor now and then to emphasize the difficulty of black life in a racist society and to underline the way that black musical traditions, like the blues, convey that pain. For instance, the speaker twice describes (in lines 10 and 18) the way that the blues singer makes his piano "moan." The piano isn't literally moaning; instead, the blues singer is playing with so much pain and intensity that it *feels* like the piano is groaning in grief and pain, echoing the pain that the singer feels.

Similarly, in line 34, the speaker describes how, after the blues singer leaves the club, "the Weary Blues echoed through his head." In other words, he still has the song stuck in his head. But the metaphor suggests that something darker is going on: the blues singer can't escape the song, he's pursued by it. There's no way out of the weary blues for him. It bounces around in his head like a song echoing through a cave.

Finally, the blues singer himself uses metaphor. In line 22, he

announces that he's going to "put ma troubles on the shelf." In other words he's going to get rid of the things that cause him sorrow and grief (among them, racism), as if putting them on a shelf and forgetting about them. Here, the blues singer is describing something potentially rebellious: he's going to refuse to continue to engage in things that have hurt him. Perhaps, he will even start protesting the racist conditions of American society. For now, though, he is cautious enough to disguise these feelings with metaphor.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "He made that poor piano moan with melody."
- **Line 18:** "that old piano moan—"
- **Line 22:** "And put ma troubles on the shelf.""
- **Line 34:** "the Weary Blues echoed through his head."

SIMILE

"The Weary Blues" contains two [similes](link). The first appears in line 13:

> He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Here, the speaker is using a now obsolete meaning of the word "fool." He isn't saying that the blues singer looks stupid or ridiculous while he's playing; instead, he's saying that he's a fool *for* his music. In other words, he's deeply in love with it, passionate about it, even drunk on it. The simile thus underlines the blues singer's passion for his music.

The second simile appears in line 35:

> He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

Here, the speaker's describing how the blues singer sleeps after he gets home in the wee hours of the morning after staying up all night, playing music. The simile operates on a few levels. On the one hand, it simply suggests that the blues singer is very tired: it's almost a [cliché](link) to describe someone who sleeps deeply as sleeping "like a rock." But, on the other hand, the simile also suggests that he's lost some of his humanity: it compares him to an inanimate object, to a dead person. His life seems to have been drained away. The simile thus quietly testifies to the costs of playing the blues—and the costs of channeling so much pain and suffering.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool."
- **Line 35:** "He slept like a rock or a man that's dead."

REPETITION

"The Weary Blues" doesn't just describe a blues song: it takes

on the distinctive rhythm and rhymes of a blues song. It *becomes* a blues song. And so, unsurprisingly, it also uses a lot of repetition. Blues songs often repeat key phrases and lines, changing them slightly, wringing all the possibility and pathos out of them.

There are several different kinds of repetition at work in "The Weary Blues." Note the epizeuxis in lines 6-7:

> He did a lazy sway…
> He did a lazy sway…

The two lines repeat each other exactly. They thus sound like the chorus of a pop song—or, better, a blues song. The speaker is using refrain here to give the poem the musicality of a blues song. And indeed, the blues singer himself uses refrain heavily in his song:

> I got the Weary Blues
> And I can't be satisfied.
> Got the Weary Blues
> And can't be satisfied—

Lines 25 and 27 repeat each other, as do lines 26 and 28, both times with slight alterations.

The speaker and the blues singer also use other kinds of repetition. For instance, there are the anaphoric repetitions of "Ain't got nobody" in lines 19 and 20. And there are the speaker's interjections in lines 11, 14, and 16: "O Blues!," "Sweet Blues!," and "O Blues!" These involve both anaphora (the repetition of "O" in lines 11 and 16) and epistrophe (with the word "Blues!" at the end of all three).

Those lines are particularly interesting: they break the flow of the poem, interrupting its rhyme scheme. They feel like moments where the speaker is transported by the music, crying out in pleasure and release. But, as the speaker does so, the poem remains pretty musical—using one of the same devices that the blues singer uses, anaphora. Indeed, these passionate cries feel like the cries a blues singer might make between verses. So even as the speaker breaks up the music of the poem, the poem's use of repetition allows it to remain connected to the musicality of the blues.

Finally, the speaker uses parallel phrases and sentences throughout the poem. For instance, there's the almost-repetition of "that poor piano" and "that old piano" in lines 10 and 18. And there are the grammatically similar sentences in lines 32 and 33. These uses of parallelism are less noticeable than the other kinds of repetition in the poem, but they too contribute to its musicality, helping the speaker not only describe but imitate the blues.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "   He did a lazy sway. . . . /   He did a lazy sway. . . ."
- **Line 10:** "that poor piano moan"
- **Line 11:** " O Blues!"
- **Line 14:** "Sweet Blues!"
- **Line 16:** "O Blues!"
- **Line 18:** "that Negro sing," "that old piano"
- **Line 19:** "Ain't got nobody"
- **Line 20:** "Ain't got nobody"
- **Line 23:** "Thump, thump, thump, "
- **Lines 25-28:** "   "I got the Weary Blues /   And I can't be satisfied. /   Got the Weary Blues /   And can't be satisfied—"
- **Lines 32-33:** "The stars went out and so did the moon. / The singer stopped playing and went to bed"

ONOMATOPOEIA

"The Weary Blues" contains a single instance of onomatopoeia, a device where language imitates an actual sound. It appears in line 23:

> **Thump, thump, thump,** went his foot on the floor.

Here, the speaker is describing watching the blues singer play the piano and sing his song. As he sings and plays, he stamps his foot on the floor, keeping time: "Thump, thump, thump." Instead of simply telling the reader how the blues singer stamps his foot, the speaker imitates the stomping directly. The three strongly stressed syllables, "thump, thump, thump" sound like a foot pounding against the hollow floor of the stage.

Onomatopoeia is thus one of several devices that the speaker uses to channel the sound, rhythm, and feel of the blues singer's song. Instead of just describing the song, the poem itself becomes a blues song. The onomatopoeia in line 23 is one of the places in the poem where the speaker is most obvious about this—where the speaker indicates most clearly that he or she wants his poem to convey the energy and rhythm of the blues song. After all, the words "thump, thump, thump" convey nothing but rhythm and energy: they don't mean anything on their own. This language is purely musical.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "Thump, thump, thump,"

📄 VOCABULARY

Droning (Line 1) - Making a continuous noise (here, this verb refers to the blues musician).

Drowsy (Line 1) - Sleepy, soft, lazy.

Syncopated (Line 1) - In technical terms, syncopation refers to music whose beats don't fall where they'd normally occur. This creates a kind of hiccup, an enticingly off-beat feel. Syncopation is very important to jazz, blues, and hip-hop.

Mellow Croon (Line 2) - A pleasant, easy singing voice.

Negro (Line 3) - A black man. At the time the poem was written, this was the standard term for referring to black people. Although it subsequently became a derogatory term, the speaker doesn't intend any disrespect.

Lenox Avenue (Line 4) - A street in Harlem—an African American neighborhood in New York City, where Langston Hughes lived when the poem was written. It is now called Malcolm X Boulevard.

Pallor (Line 5) - A pale color or light.

Gas Light (Line 5) - An old-fashioned lamp that burns gas to produce light.

Sway (Line 6, Line 7) - To swing slowly back and forth. The piano player is moving with the music.

o' (Line 8) - Of.

Blues (Line 8, Line 11, Line 14, Line 16, Line 25, Line 27, Line 34) - A form of African American popular music. First developed in the Deep South during the late 1800s, blues spread to Northern cities like New York and Chicago during the Great Migration—a period during the 1920s and 1930s when black workers emigrated from the South to the North in large numbers, seeking more freedom and economic opportunities. Blues songs deal with the hardship and suffering of black life in a racist society—and they also often express celebration and joy. They tend to follow a standard musical formula, with twelve-bar musical phrases and four-line rhyming stanzas.

Ebony (Line 9) - Dark, black, the color of ebony wood.

Ivory (Line 9) - White. At the time the poem was written, many piano keys were made out of actual ivory, a tough, white material harvested from the tusks of elephants.

Raggy (Line 13) - Like ragtime—another genre of African American popular music, closely related to the blues and characterized by energetic syncopation.

Fool (Line 13) - Someone who loves something too much. In other words, the speaker isn't saying that the piano player is stupid or comical. Instead, he's a fool *for* music.

Melancholy (Line 17) - Sad or sorrowful.

Ain't (Line 19, Line 20, Line 29) - Haven't; am not.

Ma (Line 20, Line 21, Line 22) - My.

I's Gwine (Line 21) - I'm going.

Mo' (Line 29) - More.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Weary Blues" is a poem in two stanzas. The first is 22 lines long, the second is 12. The poem doesn't follow a set form like the sonnet or the villanelle. Indeed, it implicitly rejects such forms, suggesting that they're not adequate to the poem's task—which is to capture the pain and power of black art. For Langston Hughes, working during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, it was important to break from white, European poetic traditions. He wanted to develop—and acknowledge—literary forms that came from and spoke to the experience of black people in America.

"The Weary Blues" participates directly in that project. Throughout the poem, the speaker tries to recreate the rhythms and sounds of the blues—a form of African American popular music—using alliteration, rhyme, and repetition to do so. In other words, the poem doesn't simply describe the blues—it also imitates it. In this way, the poem makes a powerful, implicit argument about the blues as a cultural tradition: it is as distinguished, as sophisticated, and as powerful as any of the poetic forms passed down in European traditions.

METER

"The Weary Blues" doesn't have a steady, established meter. Some of its lines are as long as fourteen syllables, some as short as two. Even without meter, though, the poem has a strong rhythm. This rhythm is more like the syncopated rhythm of a blues song than the strictly regimented meters of traditional poetry. Indeed, the poem draws some of its energy from the variety of its rhythms, and the freedom the speaker feels to establish and then break a rhythm. Take a look, for example, at lines 23-24:

> **Thump, thump, thump,** went his **foot** on the **floor.**
> He **played** a few **chords** then he **sang** some **more**—

The opening three words of line 23—"thump, thump, thump"—imitate the sound of the blues singer's foot pounding on the floor. (Indeed, this is a case of the poetic device onomatopoeia). The line thus starts with three heavy, stressed syllables—as if the blues song is breaking down. But then it snaps back into rhythm.

Although lines 23-24 can't be scanned in any established meter, they both have a similar number of syllables and they rhyme with each other, pairing "floor" and "more"—two strongly stressed syllables that fall at the end of the line. Meter or not, these lines have a strong and flexible rhythm—much like the blues itself.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Weary Blues" has an uneven, unpredictable rhyme scheme. Some parts of the poem follow one scheme; some parts follow a different scheme; some parts of the poem don't rhyme at all. Despite the complexity and irregularity of the poem's rhyme scheme, all its different rhymes have the same purpose: they are designed to make the poem itself feel musical—like a blues song.

Much of the poem is written in rhyming couplets. The reader can see this in lines 1-2 ("tune"/"croon") and 4-5 ("night"/"light"). However, these rhyming couplets are isolated from each other. Each couplet is followed by an interjection, like "I heard a Negro play" in line 3, or "O Blues!" in lines 11 and 16. (Adding to the poem's irregularity, line 3 rhymes with the "sway" that ends lines 6 and 7.) Lines 1-7 thus have the following pattern, which continues to morph unpredictably throughout the rest of the poem:

AABCCBB

In the poem's final five lines, lines 31-35, the speaker does sustain a series of rhymes without any interruptions or interjections. The final five lines of the poem rhyme AABBB (note that these rhyme sounds being different from the AB sounds above):

... crooned that **tune**.
... so did the **moon**.
... went to **bed**
... through his **head**.
... a man that's **dead**.

Taken all together, these rhyming couplets give the poem a musical, bluesy feeling. The rhymes are direct; they sound like the kind of rhymes one might hear in a blues song.

When the speaker quotes the blues singer directly, in lines 19-22 and 25-30, the poem comes even closer to directly imitating the blues. Lines 19-22 rhyme ABCB, which is the structure of a ballad stanza, a traditional form for songs in English:

... all this **world**,
... but ma **self**.
... quit ma **frownin**'
... on the **shelf**."

Lines 25-30 then rhyme ABABCB. Here, the poem almost follows the standard ABAB rhyme scheme that blues singers usually use in their songs:

... the Weary **Blues**
... be **satisfied**.
... the Weary **Blues**

... be **satisfied**—
... happy no **mo**'
... I had **died**."

The poem's rhyme scheme is thus complex and irregular—so much so that it hardly deserves to be called a rhyme scheme. But this irregularity is part of the point: it helps the speaker imitate the music—and the loose, improvisational feel—of the blues.

💬 SPEAKER

"The Weary Blues" provides almost no information about its speaker. The reader never learns the speaker's gender, race, age, or profession—though it's safe to assume that the speaker is, like the blues singer at the center of the poem, black. The poem is almost entirely absorbed in the "drowsy syncopated tune" that the speaker hears. The speaker describes the blues singer and his song in detail, focusing on the way his body sways with the rhythm, the way his hands move across the keys. The speaker's personality—and feelings—come through most clearly in the way that the speaker responds to the music: in the poem's first stanza, the speaker cries out "O Blues!" and "Sweet Blues!" in response. These feel like cries of pleasure and release—as though the speaker experiences a kind of relief in listening to the music. For the speaker, "The Weary Blues" provides release from the speaker's own troubles—the speaker's own suffering as (most likely) a black person living in a racist society.

🌄 SETTING

"The Weary Blues" is set in a blues club on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City. (After the poem was written, Lenox Avenue was renamed Malcolm X Boulevard.) The club is old-fashioned and run-down. For instance, it is lit only by an "old gas light"—a lamp that burns gas. In other words, it doesn't have electricity—even though by the time the poem was written, New York City had been electrified for many years.

This run-down, squalid setting reflects the difficult conditions that black people endured in New York City: neighborhoods like Harlem were neglected, poorly maintained, and poorly serviced by the City. Despite the seedy, ramshackle setting, however, the blues singer still manages to make great art—music that transports and transforms its listeners. In this way, the speaker suggests that black art manages to triumph over the limitations that racism places on it.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Weary Blues" was the title poem of Langston Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1925). Hughes's early poems, like "The Weary Blues" were key to the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement that developed in the 1920s in New York City. During the Harlem Renaissance, black artists, writers, and intellectuals—including Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen—worked to find ways of expressing the full complexity of black life in America. They often used their art to protest against racism and injustice. In doing so, many of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance worked hard to free themselves from white, European artistic traditions. They invented new artistic and literary forms; they found new language and new ways of making art that better expressed the black experience than fusty old poetic traditions like the sonnet.

The reader can see that impulse at work in "The Weary Blues." In the poem, Hughes not only describes the blues, he also imitates the distinctive sounds and rhythms of blues music. Blues is a form of popular music that developed in the deep South out of African spirituals, work songs, and other musical traditions. As black Americans moved north in the 1920s and 1930s searching for more freedom and economic opportunity, they brought their music with them—and blues musicians from the Deep South began performing regularly in cities like New York and Chicago.

Blues songs are usually written in four-line stanzas; they are repetitive, with lines echoing each other. In lines 19-22 ("'Ain't got nobody ... on the shelf.'") and 25-30, ("'I got the Weary blues ... I had died.'") the speaker directly imitates the lyrics of blues songs. And elsewhere, he does so indirectly, using repetition and alliteration to capture the mood of the music. The poem thus takes a form of popular black music and makes it into poetry. Better, the poem quietly insists that the blues is *already* as expressive, sophisticated, and significant as any European poetry tradition.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Weary Blues" was first published in 1925, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The 1920s were a difficult period for black Americans. In the South, segregation was legal—with separate schools, accommodations, and even drinking fountains, for blacks and whites. The Ku Klux Klan was resurgent: it terrorized and murdered black people in the South (and across the country). Many black Americans emigrated to the North, where they sought better job prospects and more freedom—a movement that historians call the "Great Migration."

However, things were often just as bad in the North. Once they arrived in cities like Chicago and New York, black migrants were confined to over-crowded, segregated neighborhoods like Harlem (in New York City) and Bronzeville (in Chicago) and forced to live in tiny, poorly maintained apartments. In these tiny neighborhoods, black artists and intellectuals began to gather and launched a number of important literary and artistic movements, designed to protest the oppression under which black communities lived—foremost among them, the Harlem Renaissance.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hughes Reads "The Weary Blues" — The poet reads "The Weary Blues" with a blues band accompanying him. (Hughes begins reading the poem around the 1:40 mark). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM7HSOwJw20)

- More on Hughes's Life — A detailed biography of Langston Hughes from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)

- The Harlem Renaissance — A detailed article on the history of the Harlem Renaissance from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)

- "What Is the Blues?" — A brief history of the blues from PBS. (https://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/essaysblues.html)

- 200 Years of Afro-American Poetry — An article by Hughes from the 1960s, in which he lays out his understanding of the history of African American poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69396/200-years-of-afro-american-poetry)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- I, Too
- Let America Be America Again
- Mother to Son
- The Ballad of the Landlord
- Theme for English B
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers

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