

Always a reason to
rise: the message of
"the weary blues"



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In “ The Weary Blues”, Langston Hughes uses negative language to create a generally discouraging atmosphere. The relentless dark imagery makes the reader overlook an underlying message, as the poem actually encourages its readers to push against any obstacles in their way. Rather than being beaten down by one’s problems, one should rise up and continue to resist the slow slide to depression. Through such ideals, Hughes focuses on instilling hope in African Americans, his primary audience.

In the beginning of the poem, Hughes depicts a struggling musician with a weak handle on his problems. The poem begins with, “ Droning a drowsy syncopated tune” (1), a simple line with a plethora of information woven in to it. As the first line of the poem, it establishes a melancholy tone, while retaining an oddly rhythmic aspect. The presence of syncopation changes the meaning of the beginning of the line. It adds a sense of hope, a sort of light at the end of the tunnel. The subject of the poem rocks “ back and forth to a mellow croon” (2) he plays. Despite the drowsy, drab scene, music continues to pour from the piano. The man contently swaying to his tune, which overflows with negativity, shows the gilded qualities of the race. From the surface, one describes them as successful and joyful, yet once you reach the heart of the matter, the situation changes. A muddled and wavering core contrasts the gleaming scab surrounding it. This negative portrayal is the baseline from which the subject slowly loses his grip.

As the poem progresses, the reader gains a better understanding of the musician’s mental process. The speaker specifies the subject playing the melody as an African American, but places no positive or negative connotation along with it. “ I heard a Negro play.” (3), an objective

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statement, disconnects the speaker from the situation. This negates any bias of the speaker to the subject and makes the reader trusts the speaker more. The speaker continues to describe the scene, saying he saw the musician “ Down on Lenox Avenue the other night”. (4) Lenox Avenue, a major thoroughfare in the middle of Harlem, places the subject in a hot bed of African American art and creativity. The reference to the New York street connects Hughes’ poem to the Harlem Renaissance and adds sub-surface meaning. The basis of the cultural movement was the aptitude and skill of African Americans; it takes talent to make the old, beat up piano play the smooth, mellow tune. The poem takes a different turn here: rather than exploring the good things about African Americans, the speaker adds to the scenery. The man played “ By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light”. (5) The shady aspect contrasts the brightness and excitement of the Roaring Twenties in America. The outdated gaslight, used and gloomy, could not compare to the new electric lights of the time. “ He did a lazy sway... /He did a lazy sway...” (6-7), emphasizes the man’s simple rock as he plays. Repeating the line adds to the rhythm of the stanza and makes the meaning of the line more evident. Hughes continues compiling the man’s misfortunes, but adds a glimmer of uniqueness and a sense of pride as he writes in the blues form.

The Blues is a uniquely African American art form. Hughes uses it to identify with his subject and his intended audience. Reflecting the title, the speaker describes the man as swaying “ To the tune o’ those Weary Blues. / With his ebony hands on each ivory key/ he made that poor piano moan with melody” (8-10). Not only does the poet introduce the Blues connecting the

syncopated tune to the syncopated poetry of the time, but also the subject's "ebony hands on each ivory key" (9). This contrast shows the cliché "black man in a white world" and shows the man playing the world like a piano and creating melodious music from it. Using stereotypes of the day, the author contrasts the pianist's situation with his accomplishments. This emboldens others to do the same and overcome their adversities with their abilities.

Much like the dull lamp, the tottering stool increases the burden on the pianist's shoulders. The man is "Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool" (12). The unsteady base is a reference to the man's shaky past, yet it still supports him and the man is successful. Even with second-rate equipment, the musician "played that raggy tune like a musical fool. Sweet Blues!" (13-14) The man doesn't care that he plays on a beat up piano rather than in a private club in an upper class neighborhood. Music is seen as indifferent to race and situation. It, like other art forms, allows one to express themselves on an even plane. Showing more of the musician's connection to his piece, the speaker describes the music as "Coming from a black man's soul." (15) Rather than being a product of the musician, his song becomes a part of the man. The sad song he plays is now even more connected to him personally. The metaphorical gray cloud over the man's head swells with disheartening rain as Hughes continues describing him.

The situation further deteriorates when the man begins singing. No longer does the man only play a mellow Blues tune, his melancholy lyrics further reveal his condition. Even before the actual lyrics, the reader can imagine the man leisurely letting the words flow from his mouth. "In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—" <https://assignbuster.com/always-a-reason-to-rise-the-message-of-the-weary-blues/>

(17-18), the man and the instrument have a connection to one another. As a unit, the gloomy pair sang “ Ain’t got nobody in all this world, Ain’t got nobody but ma self” (19-20). This first sentence of lyrics isolates the man and his ethnicity from the rest of the world. African Americans feel as if no one but themselves look out for them and that they are quarantined from the rest of humanity. To finish the thought and the stanza, the lyrics say, “ I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’ And put ma troubles on the shelf” (21-22). Using ebonic dialect in the lyrics places the man as distinctly African American who does not speak the accepted, “ white” English. This distinctive quality among African Americans makes them one with the subject of the poem. Putting his troubles on the shelf, the musician in the poem decides to stop allowing problems to get in his way. He has to rely on his own will to accomplish goals, the man resolves to stop letting difficulties make him miserable and to power through them.

The pianist teeters on the edge of depression after, just lines before, deciding to resist falling into such a state; the man is unstable and contemplates giving up on life. In the beginning of the final stanza, the musician shortly stops singing to stomp the beat with his foot and play intermittent chords before continuing to sing on. “ I got the Weary Blues/ And I can’t be satisfied. / Got the Weary Blues/ And can’t be satisfied” (25-28). The man knows of his own glum condition, but determines that there can be no end to his sadness. The previous lyric of placing his problems on a shelf seems only to have led to more problems. These “ Weary Blues” seem as if they’ll never go away, yet he continues to play. The last two lines of lyrics are especially dark, “ I ain’t happy no mo’ And I wish that I had died”

(29-30). Hoping for death is not a productive thought. The man is struggling with whether or not resisting his problems is worth it. Pondering this idea late at night, the man stops and goes to bed. He does this only after “ The stars went out and so did the moon” (32). These small, twinkling lights in the sky are his hope, the only thing keeping him going. Once he no longer has hope, there seems no reason for the man to stay awake (33). “ The singer stopped playing and went to bed”, is a slower, less flowing line. It makes the reader stop and pronounce each word, breaking the easy current of the Blues form. Throughout the poem, the poet followed traditional Blues form and rhythm, but at the end, Hughes plays with the form to disturb the reader. The last three lines of the poem rhyme, the last two being “ While the Weary Blues echoed through his head. / He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.” These lines express the seriousness of the man’s early claims of wanting to die. The dark, mysterious ending, when related to the rest of the poem, shows the man fighting against a will to die. The situation and position the musician is in drove him to suicidal thoughts, the moon and stars keeping him hopeful, he played long into the night. When his hope fell away, he went to sleep, not a dead sleep, but a deep one; the man had his troubles on his mind while he lied down to sleep. Earlier in the poem, he’d agreed to put them on a shelf and not to worry about them. As his syncopated tune fades, the issues return. The man has run out of reasons to fight, he reaches for anything to pull him from the emotional chasm.

The man’s descent from playing mellow tune to a depressing death-wish type song brings the story of the musician and the African American race full circle. Sleeping like a rock, the man is as good as dead, but he will rise the

next morning to play the same beautiful, depressing song once again.

Waking allows the man to once again place his complications on a shelf and hope the stars and moon never go out. Hughes is showing the reader no matter the negatives, there is a reason to wake up every morning.