

## الموسيقى والمعاناة في قصائد مختارة للشاعر لانغستون هيوز

### Music and Suffering in Selected poems by Langston Hughes

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#### المستخلص

للموسيقى مكانة خاصة في الأدب والثقافة الإفريقية الأمريكية على نحو مماثل، وتعزى مثل هذه الأهمية بالدرجة الأساس إلى حقيقة أن الموسيقى تلعب دوراً حيوياً في كشف النقاب عن معاناة وحالة الكبت والتمييز التي يواجهها الأفريقيون الأمريكيون بشجاعة، ويتغلبون عليها في نضالهم المتواصل بحثاً عن هويتهم الضائعة. ويعد لانغستون هيوز أبرز من اعتقد بأهمية الموسيقى وإسهامها في المجتمع الأسود في محاولة لتسليط الضوء على أن حقيقة هويتهم توضع على الهامش. وعليه، يدرس هذا البحث قصائد مختارة للشاعر هيوز الذي يعتقد اعتقاداً راسخاً بسطوة الموسيقى لإحداث التغيير المنشود. يتناول البحث أيضاً كيف تعد الموسيقى وسيلة للتعبير عن معاناة الأفريقيين الأمريكيين في مجتمع يغطي عليه حكم الأغلبية البيضاء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإفريقي الأمريكي، الهوية، الموسيقى، المعاناة، لانغستون هيوز

#### **Abstract**

Music has a special status in the African American literature and culture alike. Such a status is primarily assigned to the fact that music is vital in unmasking the suffering, repression, segregation, and other heart-rending experiences the African Americans have courageously encountered and overcome in their persistent struggle to search for their lost identity. Langston Hughes is truly the most representative adherents of the substantial contribution of the music in the black community in an attempt to cast a shadow on the fact that their identity is always placed at the margin. The paper therefore studies selected poems by Langston Hughes who has a deeply-held belief in the power of music to change things for the better. It also examines how music is branded as a means to express the African American suffering and concerns under the governance of the white vast majority.

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**Keywords:** African American, identity, music, suffering, Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes (1902-1967), one of the most outspoken harbingers of the Harlem Renaissance, is a poet, a novelist, an essayist, a playwright, an autobiographer, and a writer of children's books. Born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, Langston Hughes grew up mainly in Lawrence, Kansas, but also lived in Illinois, Ohio, and Mexico. By the time Hughes enrolled at Columbia University in New York, he had already launched his literary career with his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the *Crisis*, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois. He had also committed himself both to writing and to writing mainly about African Americans. Hughes's sense of dedication was instilled in him most of all by his maternal grandmother, Mary Langston, whose first husband had died at Harpers Ferry as a member of John "Brown's band, and whose second husband (Hughes's grandfather) had also been a militant abolitionist. Another important family figure was John Mercer Langston, a brother of Hughes's grandfather who was one of the best-known black Americans of the nineteenth century. At the same time, Hughes struggled with a sense of desolation fostered by parental neglect. He himself recalled being driven early by his loneliness "to books, and the wonderful world in books." Such suffering- charged life seemingly motivated him to express his own concerns and those of his black community which represent refusing all forms of segregation and oppression. Hughes, in writing his poems, had many kinds of music such blues and jazz incarnated in them, and his poems are usually recited with a musical accompaniment (Perkins, 807). Such musical accompaniment aims at leaving a profound impact on readers in a manner as to create sympathy and understanding in them.

Arnold Rampersad says in *The Life of Langston Hughes* that "On a visit to Kansas City he became aware of yet another aspect of black culture on which he would draw later as an artist and an individual. At an open air theatre on Independence Avenue, from an orchestra of blind musicians, Hughes first heard the blues. The music seemed to cry, but the words somehow laughed" (qtd. in Komunyakaa 1140).

He is always branded as the spokesman for the black calling for freedom on all levels. Transcending suffering by transforming it into song is the aesthetic strategy of African-American blues. The blues is a traditional form that descends from slave songs and was popularized in the early twentieth century by such figures as W. C. Handy, Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leadbelly, and Robert Johnson. The noted African-American poet Langston Hughes examines the relationship between suffering and African American music in two poems that may be considered side-by side, "The Weary Blues" (1925) and "Trumpet Player" (1947)(Allan,182). The first focuses on a blues pianist, the second on a jazz trumpeter. "Weary Blues" was an actual blues song written in 1915 by Artie Matthews, with lyrics by Mort Greene and George Cates; it was recorded by, among others, Louis Armstrong's Hot Sevens. The title of Hughes's poem is similar to this song. However, it seems that the Hughes's lyrics are painted with pessimism and darkness which is not strongly felt as is the case in the original. (Allan 182).

In an interview with Hughes, he expresses his readiness to espouse the black rights of leading a dignified and respectful life , a matter which he always attempted to fulfill through poetry in the first place:

I live among my people. I love them, and the way they're treated hurts me deeply. So I sing their blues and translate their sorrows, I make their troubles go away. And I do this like my people do, with their same ease. You know I've never bothered to learn the rules of versification. I'm one of those lucky people who has never written a sonnet. I write what comes from within. I sing it the same way old people do. I don't study the Black man. I 'feel' him" (Guillen 56).

It is quite conspicuous that Hughes is principally moved by the excruciating experiences the black folks challengingly confronted in the course of history. He shows an unrivalled empathy for his marginalized and oppressed people.

Another related point to Hughes's writing about the sufferings of black people is how places left a profound impact on Hughes and inspired them to compose his blues poems. He once said: "I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street," he said. These songs "had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going" (qtd. in Rummel 42).

"The Weary Blues" is taken from a collection of poems with the same title. In these poems," he already had fused into his poetry its key technical commitment: the music of black Americans as the prime source and expression of their cultural truths"( Hughes 4). This poem presents the African-American artist as creating something sublime in a squalid context. The piano may be "poor" and the stool "rickety," but both piano and man moan with syncopated music, drawn straight from the soul, throughout the entire night. There can be no doubt about the authenticity of this music or the way it represents and speaks to the misfortunes of African Americans(Allen 182).Thereupon, "Hughes's poetry not only incorporates the rhythms of familiar music but also covers topics common to many blues songs: economic hardship, failed romance, loneliness, and sexual desire"(Galens 103).

In "The Weary Blues" Hughes implies that the conventional blues idiom is so compelling, and so limited, as to threaten his imaginative freedom. In addition, the mechanical objects that occupy the poem's setting—the gas light, the rickety stool, the piano parts, and so on—evoke another modern development that imperils artistic freedom(Patterson 404). Reference to the relationship between music and the soul reminds one of "The Weary Blues," but

the image of the hypodermic needle evokes the drug culture associated with jazz around the time of the poem's composition. Many significant jazz artists of the forties and fifties were heroin addicts. Some, like Miles Davis and John Coltrane, eventually beat their habit; but others, like Charlie Parker and Bill Evans, were destroyed by it; and others still, like Dexter Gordon and Billie Holiday, were incarcerated for it. Drugs and jazz were both means of transcending the harsh realities of urban African-American life. Hughes questions, as Patterson argues, "popular notions of racial authenticity in music"(Patterson 409).

One of the most significant features of Hughes's poetry is the search for identity which pervades the texture of "The Weary Blues." Blues music is a kind of music which showcases the black man's suffering. Hughes depicts the blues as " today songs, here and now, broke and broken-hearted, when you're troubled in mind and don't know what to do, and nobody cares"(Hughes 159). Hughes goes to expand on the kinds of blues music. These kinds address peculiar issues in the African- American history like family problems, the relationship between man and woman, hunger, alienation, and so on(159). He dwells on this subject in the following lines:

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--  
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,  
Ain't got nobody but ma self.

I's gwine to quit ma frownin'

And put ma troubles on the shelf." (LL. 16-21)

The Negro's song is one of sadness and melancholy. He undergoes a bitter sense of solitude and self- disintegration, uselessly attempting to find his identity, "Ain't got nobody in all this world,.../ And put ma troubles on the shelf." Once again, Hughes speaks the unspeakable in an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable." In writing "The Weary Blues," he took the sounds of street music and street talk and transformed them into a powerful and evocative voice all his own"(Rummel 28). It is quite obvious that Hughes shouldered himself the responsibility of unmasking all grave circumstances encountered by his black folks, a responsibility from which he never disclaimed himself whatever the situation might be.

Quite unequivocally, the sad tone of the music is further increased by the heart-rending 'moan' uttered by the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race"(Vendler 353) as he once called himself:

To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

With his ebony hands on each ivory key

He made that poor piano moan with melody.

O Blues!

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool

He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Closely examined, these lines reveal overmuch about Hughes's psychological protest against weariness. He appears unhappy with the life he leads. There is a death-wish mixed with the sense of life given by the "Sweet Blues", a matter that helps him reach his own identity (Ismail 116).

In " Misery," Hughes also employs blues music to demonstrate how the black man is persistently vulnerable to intense suffering. He describes his reaction to the fact that the black people are unavoidably involved in a bitter struggle for their salvation:

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. (LL. 7-12)

This sense of weariness is firmly sensed in these lines. For the sake of emphasis, the speaker often repeats, the word "weary" to enlarge on the black suffering. Quite significantly, repetition is connected with the black culture and the search for their own identity. As James A. Snead in his article "Repetition as a figure of black culture " says, "Repetition in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music, dance and language"(68).

As a potential solution for this long-standing weariness and the feeling of depression, Hughes believes in the power of blues music to put an end to the speaker's great suffering and torture:

Play the blues for me.

Play the blues for me.  
No other music  
'LI ease my misery.  
Sing a soothin' song.  
Said a soothin' song,  
Cause the man I love's done (LL. 13-19)

Once again, the blues music can soothe and alleviate his miserable life, declaring " Play the blues for me./No other music [can] ease my misery. Music no doubt leaves a cathartic and purifying effect on the hearer. In fact, it is through the profound influence of music that the black man can ventilate his suppressed emotions, segregation, and marginalization.

" Trumpet Player" presents a harsher view of political and social realities. Behind the jazz trumpeter's eyes and bittersweet music lies the fact( Allen 182). This overall description of the black people is best encapsulated in the following lines:

The Negro  
With the trumpet at his lips  
Has dark moons of weariness  
Beneath his eyes  
Where the smoldering memory  
Of slave ships  
Blazed to the crack of whips  
about thighs. (LL. 1-8)

Here the music functions as a reminder of the dim past where the slavery



dominated the scene and the oppression was practiced against the Negros. The poem's most pointed metaphor occurs in the penultimate stanza, where it is revealed that the music is closely linked with suffering. Yet, Hughes closes the lines quoted above with a glimmer of hope breaking the veil of darkness:

It's hypodermic needle  
to his soul  
but softly  
as the tune comes from his throat  
trouble  
mellows to a golden note. (LL. 39-44)

This glimpse of hope for a better future is affiliated with a strong desire for life, a "Desire that is longing for the moon/ where the moonlight's but a spotlight in his eyes." The hope for a brighter future and the desire for a better life are indispensable. Both poems give the possibility to reach to a world beyond cares, beyond squalor and oppression. Hughes symbolizes the limited, diminished world of the trumpet player by showing how his moonlight is reduced to a spotlight and his sea to a glass of liquor. Despite the fact that its imagery is more foreboding than that of "The Weary Blues," "Trumpet Player" ends on a positive note, by emphasizing how the musician transforms trouble into "a golden note"—an image recalling the "golden in the sunset" from Hughes's signature poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Like Sonny, the jazz pianist in James Baldwin's classic story "Sonny's Blues," both the blues pianist and the trumpet player have clearly suffered to play the way they do. Suffering gives their playing emotional force and authenticity..." (Allen 183).

To recapitulate, Hughes always strikes a note when he deals with issues of racial nature. Both Whitman and Hughes seem to share an American dream which has at its nucleus the building of a greater America where justice in its totality is the common denominator among the different ranks of America. The whites and blacks are equal in every aspect of life (Gibson 44). In his poem "Let America be America Again", his style is reminiscent of the Whitmanesque celebration of the spiritual democracy as it were. His suffering as a black man and his dream of the ideal America are lionized in a rather captivating manner. He calls for equality, liberty, and fraternity which constitute the milestone of the utopian world man dreams to have and live in.

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