The Weary Blues: A Canvas of Identity and Expression across the Black Diaspora

Langston Hughes' 1926 debut collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, is a melodic chorus of its time. The collection sees the Harlem Renaissance veteran voice the inner croons of a generation given a new sense of freedom after being creatively pigeonholed for lifetimes. Throughout the 68 poems, Hughes acts as a voice of the African American experience by engaging with themes of racial oppression and legacy, identity and belonging, as well as the importance and effect of a creative space of expression—which here finds a home in the many jazz nightclubs of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes prefaces this burst of black culture with *proem*, where his state of mind is apparent. The six-stanza piece is a clear indication of someone not only deeply connected with their people but of someone who understands they are not an individual, merely one chain link in the shackles bound at their ancestors' feet. One petal braving the systematic winds of this 13 stripes and 50 star nation that will one day fall in the winter so a new bud can bloom in the following spring. In the piece, the speaker characterizes themself as a "negro, slave, worker, singer, and victim" (Hughes 1) through the "sorrow" of Washington – America. While the struggle of African American people is a strong surface-level exploration of what it means to be black in America, Hughes sinks deeper and professes his love for his people – for himself – while acknowledging that he has been wronged, that we have been wronged: "black as the night is black, black like the depths of my Africa" (Hughes 1). At the end of this couplet of similes, he adds *my Africa*, this possession of the motherland, asserts a pride in his people. While the negro is black as the night is black, throughout the collection Hughes will paint the night gorgeously; he will show you how beautiful the night is, how beautiful black is.

One of the elements of this body of work that keeps it refreshing after nearly a century is its dedication to expound on the reality of the 1920s black experience fully. While the Harlem Renaissance had been a gleaming half-a-decade (plus) festival of black music, literature, and artistic expression, by the time this collection was released (1926), the era was dying down. It became ever-important to continue the essence of the Harlem Renaissance, even if there was no renaissance. At its heart, the movement was built upon the urge to share black stories and experiences, and Hughes engages with this, carrying on the people's legacies in poems such as *Aunt Sue's Stories*. The realities of those who came before the boy in the piece are retold through the words of this matriarch figure, Aunt Sue. She relays to him an image of enslaved black people "working in the hot sun / walking in the dewy night / singing sorrow songs" (Hughes 39), and through this imagery, Aunt Sue is able to connect this young child to his lineage. In the

third stanza, Hughes writes, “the dark-faced child, listening, knows that Aunt Sue’s stories are real stories / that they came out of her own life” (Hughes 39). Poems such as this highlight the responsibility of ancestry and lineage that the Harlem Renaissance carried from the ‘20s and beyond. Hughes places the importance of these respected elders through *Aunt Sue’s Stories* by implying that only through listening to Aunt Sue does the young boy learn that the narratives of his people are not simply fiction. Furthermore, the child is given a perspective that illuminates how black people persevered throughout such turmoils, with Aunt Sue (and even himself) being a living example of such strength.

Secondly, alienation and the search for a sense of belonging in a place you were forcibly anchored within are, naturally, prevalent themes in African American literature. In *The Weary Blues*, however, Hughes doesn’t simply give the audience an exploration of black identity loss among a white majority; he also exemplifies the alienation within the internal struggles of being mixed race in America, as well as the almost spiritual connection to the ancestral roots of nature—from the river of the Nile to the magnolia of the South. In *Cross*, the speaker is born to a white father and a black mother. Hughes juxtaposes these two identities throughout the poem, “my old man died in a fine big house / my ma died in a shack” (Hughes 34). The opposing lives of the speaker’s mother and father reflected the social makeup of the nation at the time—of course, a strong generalization. The speaker has cursed their parents in the past, and we can infer they blame their parents for their loss of identity – perpetually stuck between two worlds, the line so stark, so sharp you’ll slice your ankle on the wind attempting to jump across it. The last two lines read, “I wonder where I’m gonna die / being neither white nor black” (Hughes 34), which further juxtaposes these two selfhoods; the speaker doesn’t entertain the notion that they can be black and white as if the integration of the two was so unfathomable, comical even. The matter of identity and belonging is also accentuated in *The South*, where Hughes characterizes the South through the juxtaposition of its beauty and its disrespect. He writes, “lazy, laughing South / blood on its mouth / beast-strong / idiot-branded” (Hughes 34), which paints the South as an antagonist, a place where enslaved African Americans were used for labor while affluent whites sat back, having the reason to laugh at life. Then Hughes describes what the region meant to black people, despite the misfortunes it placed on them: “warmth, earth, warmth / beautiful like a woman” (Hughes 34). This juxtaposition comes to a head when Hughes starts to weave the two as one, the black protagonist South and the white antagonist South: “passionate, cruel / honey-lipped, syphilitic / that is the South” (Hughes 34). Through this characterization, Hughes expertly captures the bittersweet sentiments African American people harbored towards the South, towards this place that could be inhabited by hurricanes and typhoons fiending to drown them out while also producing the petrichor rain that bloomed the sweet magnolias and the cornmeal from the field that had been converted into cornbread by the time it reached the table, paired with pork and beans. A place where

they were subsequently not wanted, a palace where they did not belong, and a place that forced them to be closer than ever, a place that subconsciously mothered a sense of community.

Lastly, the blues and jazz were indicative of the centuries of cinder blocks cracking enslaved people's backs. Everyday people were given the space to pass on their woes, woes that had been brewing for generations before. Hughes captures this raw burst of beauty, talent, and creativity through the melopoeia practically breathing – singing – throughout the collection. The enthusiastic poet writes in the titular piece, *The Weary Blues*, "with his ebony hands on each ivory key / he made that poor piano moan with melody / O Blues!" (Hughes 5). Here, we can see how the pianist expresses his woes through music, an opportunity black people were not given at such scale before the Harlem Renaissance. Notably, Hughes punctuates the *blues* with an exclamation mark, alluding to the fact that, through the Harlem Renaissance jazz nightclubs, black people could take control of their own pain and turn it into something tragically beautiful. In *Harlem Night Club*, Hughes paints the scene of a lively Harlem nightclub that sees African American people and white people alike joined together through jazz, "white girls' eyes / call gay black boys / dark brown girls / in blond men's arms" (Hughes 14). In this poem, we, the audience, are shown what a space for black expression can accomplish. The jazz club serves as a symbol of this integration and a sense of belonging for the black community. These artistic spaces were sometimes the only places black people felt embraced by their white neighbors and safe enough to express emotions, which are not bound by color, without judgment and backlash.

In conclusion, Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues* masterfully dissects themes of racial oppression and legacy, identity and belonging, and the integrative power of creative expression. The melodic and imagistic poems allow us to dive into the complexities of the black experience in America by describing the black community's resilience. The collection deconstructs the negative connotation surrounding simply being black and rebuilds it as a majestic sculpture while adhering to ancestral roots and a connection to nature. Hughes' reflection on the black community's lineage, identity, and shared spaces has since continued to resonate with readers, presenting fervent glimpses into the multifaceted nature of the African American journey.