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## The Theme of Racial Discrimination in “The Weary Blues” Langston Hughes

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**Abstract:** To identify dements and reveal the techniques used by the author to illustrate racial discrimination and injustice. This work includes several tasks that will be clarifying: to give general information; to give brief information of the evidence of the Harlem period in America; to explain about that period in America. In this research include historical, biographic, analytical, descriptive and comparative methods.

**Key words:** Blues man’s song, term Negro, a running fool, rock and roll

The publication of “The Weary Blues” in 1925 was the centerpiece of one of the most successful publicity stunts in literary history, one that elevated its author, Langston Hughes, to fame as a leading African American writer. Hughes thought of himself as a poet, but like most modern poets, found that he had to write in other formats to support himself, and so he was also a short-story writer, novelist, essayist, and newspaper columnist. Hughes is generally ranked among the greatest African American writers of the first half of the twentieth century; he is slightly older than the novelists Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, who are the best comparisons for his literary achievement. Hughes is a figure of the Harlem Renaissance, the flourishing of black artistic achievement centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City during the 1920s. Hughes was widely traveled, and his aesthetic and political views were informed by the wider perspective of an international black community embracing Paris, Africa, and the Caribbean. “The Weary Blues” was written at the beginning of Hughes's career. It brought him popularity in the black community as a leading poet and representative voice, as well as in the American scene at large, popularity that had him using his summer breaks from college for national book tours.

Lines 1–18 “The Weary Blues” consists of a narrative spoken by an anonymous narrator in which are embedded two fragments of a song performed by a bluesman that the speaker hears. The poem begins with a recollection of hearing the bluesman sing and play. In the first sentence, the performer is identified as African American using the term Negro, a term now outdated but still current when this poem was written. The word is capitalized, lending it a special dignity. The music is described with technical terms that would signal, especially to a white audience, that he is performing traditional black music. Since ragtime had become popular a generation before, syncopation (irregular musical rhythm) was associated with black music. Hughes evokes terms characteristic of black performance that would later pass into popular white culture. Crooning, originally a term referring to birds' song, was applied to black singing as a metaphor for a particular style long before it was taken up by white performers such as Bing Crosby. Similarly, Hughes



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anticipates the coining of the phrase “rock and roll.” Hughes uses poetic techniques such as alliteration and assonance (the repetition of sounds) to suggest the musicality he evokes with the poem.

The events of the poem take place on Lenox Avenue, doubtless at one of the many jazz clubs that thrived there during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The structure of the poem now begins to suggest the structure of the blues, with the repetition of whole lines. Although the individual lines of the poems all stay within traditional metrical forms, the poem was considered innovative for its time for techniques such as this repetition, as well as the apparently arbitrary lengths of the lines. Although the performer is seated at a piano bench as he plays and sings, he is moving in a way that suggests dancing, and that kind of motion, as much as any musical form, is suggested by Hughes's metrical choices.

The narrator contrasts the bluesman's black skin with the white keys of the piano. The piano, of course, has black keys too, so this suggests a more fundamental identification between musician and music. The melancholy feeling that will soon pour forth in the bluesman's song is already to be heard in his piano playing.

The eleventh line of the poem is an interjection that breaks out of the voice of the poem thus far, invoking the spirit of the blues itself. It suggests the call-and-response format used in many black churches and among southern field laborers. It is an invocation to the power of those black traditions, and at the same time a cry of despair before the sadness of life. The blues itself is a music of sadness and loss.

Lines 12 and 13 are often taken as comic, but they may also be read as serious. Although the bluesman is sitting in a precarious position, he is playing music that is ragged in the sense of being syncopated, like ragtime. Moreover, he is portrayed as a virtuoso. An idiom holds that an outstanding track-and-field athlete would be “a running fool,” that is, devoted to running beyond all reason, and the same term is applied to the bluesman's musicianship here.

Lines 16 and 17 are further interjections about the blues. Experience of the blues, they suggest, however painful it may be, is not without rewards, because it is living, and not to experience them would be not living. The source of the blues, the narrator insists, is the interior mental and spiritual condition of American blacks, who have lived under one form of oppression or another for centuries.

Hughes now introduces the first quotation of the blues song, describing the bluesman and his voice. He is again identified as a Negro, and the words that apply to him might just as well apply to all African Americans, weighed down with long suffering and a vast depth of sadness. The performer and his music are again strongly identified, suggesting an identity between the black experience and the blues.

Lines 19–22 The poem now switches to the first snippet of the bluesman's song. He expresses the idea that he is completely isolated. He is determined not to let his loneliness get him down, but to get the better of his difficult circumstances. It seems as though he wants to turn from self-pity to self-reliance. Hughes's characters are often representatives of the black race, and in this sense, the bluesman is facing up to the difficulties imposed on blacks in a segregated America.



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Lines 23 and 24- The next two lines divide the two quotations of the bluesman's song from each other. This could also have been accomplished by inserting a blank line, so these lines must communicate some important aspect of the poem or else Hughes would not have included them. They report the bluesman's actions in between singing the two stanzas, realistically describing the actions of tapping his foot and playing the piano. However, the lines are filled with repeated words and an emphasis on repeated action that seems figurative, as if the repetition of action reflects the lives of black Americans, lived over and over again in oppression.

Line 25-30 Now the bluesman's tune is quite changed. Earlier, he had resolved to set aside his sadness, but in these lines he seems overwhelmed by it. The theme of repetition is continued by repeating two couplets with only slight variation, a device typical of, for example, the biblical Psalms, but supplanted in genuine blues songs by groups of three repeated lines. Hughes is drawing on spiritual traditions from within the black community other than the blues. The bluesman is worn down to the point where happiness seems impossible to him and he longs for death.

Lines 31-35 Finally, the narrator continues to listen to the bluesman's performance, perhaps until dawn. The narrator does not describe his own actions following the end of the performance, but rather those of the bluesman. He goes to bed but cannot stop contemplating the melancholy subject of his song. At last, though, he sleeps like a dead man. Although that is a common metaphor for a particularly sound sleep, there is an intimate connection between death and sleep in the poetic tradition, and the closing of the poem suggests that the bluesman is finally worn down by his cares and surrenders to death.

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