

TALKIN' BOUT THE BLUES:
THE BLUES POETRY OF STERLING BROWN, LANGSTON HUGHES AND
JACK KEROUAC

THESIS

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To Helen
for keeping
my blues away

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I. History

During the early twentieth century, blues became an increasingly popular form of music, especially as it began to evolve into jazz. Although some critics hesitate to say that blues lyrics are a type of early African American poetry, others believe that these lyrics have the qualities necessary to be considered poetry. Some American poets even wrote "blues" or "jazz" poetry. Writers such as Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, for example, wrote many poems in the form of blues lyrics. And although his poems are written in a style generally characterized as "jazz," Jack Kerouac called many of them "blues." In this thesis, I will examine how blues has been a major influence on American poetry and argue that the poetry of Brown, Hughes, and Kerouac shows the strength of the blues lyric as a poetic form.

In order to lay a foundation for discussing the blues lyric as poetry, it is important first to discuss briefly

blues as a musical form in terms of both style and history. Blues grew out of a new cultural climate in the United States. By the 1860s, black Americans found themselves free from bondage, but not from oppression. Not only were they looked down on by whites, but blacks remained poor, unable to find jobs because of both skin color and a lack of education. Growing out of the oral tradition begun by the African slave songs, the blues emerged as a form of entertainment that vocalized the hardships of the people who sang it. Eileen Southern says, "the early anonymous singers of the blues were often wanderers, sometimes blind, who carried their sorrowful songs from one black community to another" (330). These men and women turned their sorrow into music and poetry, traveling from town to town to make a meager living from their art.

In the early twentieth century, blues began to grow in popularity when blues songs began to be published and recorded for the first time. Popular composers such as W. C. Handy began writing and publishing blues as well as playing blues songs in a wider variety of venues. The blues were no longer heard only in black speakeasies and juke joints but also in more well-established entertainment venues, especially as blues gave way to jazz. Studios began sending agents into the field to record blues for the

lucrative "race records" that were being sold to a growing minority market (Brown 287). Due to the initiative of these composers and record companies, blues gained a wider audience in the early twentieth century, but the music has also been traced as far back as the mid-nineteenth century.

Blues grew out of a strong black musical tradition, which included early Negro spirituals, worksongs, and church songs. Although blues is often thought to have evolved from these early forms, as Harold Courlander suggests in his Negro Folk Music, U.S.A., early blues actually co-existed with these forms and was sung alongside them (128). While differing substantially from these other musical styles, blues lyrics were clearly influenced by them. The worksong, sung by a group while working in the fields, on the railroad, or on a chain gang, although stylistically different from blues, is echoed in blues lyrics such as Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man," in which Reed sings:

Big boss man

Can't you hear me when I call

Big boss man

Can't you hear me when I call

Well you ain't so big

You just tall that's all. (Titon 36)

Many of the themes of these early forms of black music found their way into the blues. However, while the spirituals, worksongs, and church songs generally had a theme and subject matter focusing on spirituality, labor and religion, blues had--and still has--a wider range of subject matter. These subjects include everything from poverty, jail, prayer, and homelessness to restlessness, relationships, revenge, and the violence of both men and nature, as can be seen in John Lee Hooker's "Tupelo," a blues ballad about a great flood in Mississippi. Hooker sings:

A dark cloud rose way back in ol' Tupelo,
Mississippi
Wasn't that a mighty time, now
Wasn't that a mighty time
Wasn't that a mighty time, a mighty time.
It rained both night and day.

The destructive Mississippi flood of 1927 became a popular subject for many blues singers, making the disaster an almost mythical event, at times paralleling the biblical flood. The poor people of Tupelo cry out, "Lord have mercy," and "who can we turn to now but you" (Hooker). The pleas of the residents of Tupelo recall the Negro

spirituals and show the grave nature of the situation. The destruction is so great that only God can help them.

What makes blues songs on these subjects different from worksongs or spirituals is the way in which these subjects are treated. Like blues, the worksong deals with loss; however, it is a less personal type of song, sung by a leader and an echoing group. Spirituals, early black religious songs, were also typically sung by a group. Blues, by contrast, is a much more personal music, generally sung by one person about his or her own misfortunes. While spirituals and worksongs dealt with the issues of black American life, hardships, and spirituality in a social context, blues deals with these same issues on an individual scale. As LeRoi Jones says in his book Blues People, although it has grown out of the black American cultural experience, "blues still went back for its impetus and emotional meaning to the individual, to his completely personal life and death" (67). This personal treatment of the blues lyric distinguishes it not only as a musical style but also as a blues philosophy. Courlander, in his book on Negro folk music, states, "in substance, the blues is a genre utilized to express personal dissatisfaction, remorse, or regret; to tell the world about your misfortune and the way you feel about it" (128). While a chain gang

may collectively share the same sort of miseries and misfortunes as the bluesman, his is a more personal melancholy, telling of his specific miseries.

The blues style lends itself to a highly personal quality, which becomes evident when one compares blues with the closely related style, jazz. This close relationship between blues and jazz reflects the fact that they have grown out of the same musical tradition. However, as the musical tradition grew, it split into these two forms. While taking different stylistic paths, jazz and blues have the same roots and remain very closely related, making it difficult sometimes to distinguish between them. This is due partly to the fact that, as Bruce Cook says, "they were more or less different styles of the same music: jazz chiefly instrumental (heavy on the brass), and blues chiefly vocal (usually with string accompaniment)" (23). As the gap between blues and jazz widened, jazz became more a musical ensemble style and blues became a more stripped down, personal vocal style. Many blues were simply spoken and not sung, while in the background, the musical accompaniment mainly served to help set the mood for the lyric.

The sad mood set by blues music was achieved through an innovation of the blues musicians. Rather than using

traditional musical scales, the blues musician altered the scales to incorporate what became known as the "blue note." Cook explains, "if in the blues scale, we drop certain notes from major to minor, the effect is basically a sad sound" (25). The sad tone of these notes played behind the spoken or sung blues lyric reinforces the blues feel and "philosophy"--one of sadness and misfortune.

It is the lyric itself, however, which is the driving force behind any blues. Courlander points out that the music is merely secondary: "because the music is often haunting and moving, it is easy to overlook the reality that a genuine blues in its natural setting is not primarily conceived as music, but as a verbalization of deeply felt personal meanings" (145). It is through these vocalizations of meaning that the form of the typical blues song is derived.

The most popular and recognizable form of the blues is called the twelve-bar form. This form consists of several three-line verses in which "the second line repeats the first, sometimes with slight variation, while the third completes the thought with a rhyme" (Tilton 7). James Cotton's "Cotton Crop Blues" is a perfect example of the twelve-bar form. Cotton sings:

Ain't gonna raise no more cotton

I'll tell you the reason why I say so
Ain't gonna raise no more cotton
Tell you the reason why I say so
Well and you don't get nothin' for your cotton
And your seed's so doggone low. (Titon 41)

The form derives its name from the music itself, each verse taking up twelve measures or bars. Jones explains, "the words of the song usually occupy about one-half of each line [four bars], leaving a space of two bars for either a sung answer or instrumental response" (68). These responses were usually improvised by the singer, allowing him to further integrate his personality and emotion into the song.

If we look at Cotton's blues, we see that the repetition of the first line not only allows the singer the opportunity to reiterate his situation but also provides the illusion for the listener of being trapped in the singer's blues. As the singer dwells on his problems, we are forced to do so as well, having to wait for the conclusion to his thoughts. In addition to the trapped feeling, the drawn out length of the lines, as well as the sound of the language, promotes the "blue" feeling of the subject. The line length provides a sinking feeling while the assonance of the "o" sound gives a melancholy quality

to the language--much like the "blue notes" do for the music.

The twelve-bar form was among the first recorded and published blues, which accounts for the popularity of this form among later songwriters. However, classic twelve-bar is not the only form that a blues lyric can take. Creating an altered twelve-bar form, some blues keep the same three-line verses with an end rhyme, but drop the repetition, using the second line to build on the first. A typical example is "Too Lazy" by T-Bone Walker:

My friends all think I'm a jerk,

cause I never bother to work.

I want to let you know, just how I feel.

I'm too lazy to work and too nervous to steal.

Note how the second line of the verse explains the singer's situation rather than repeating it. Altering the form in this fashion allows the singer more space in which to tell his story.

Other blues leave the twelve-bar form altogether, instead taking the form of a ballad. The ballads are generally longer blues that tell a story, as in Mississippi John Hurt's "Stagolee." Hurt begins by simply speaking rather than singing over his guitar as he begins the story:

Stagolee was a bad man.

He goes down in the coal mine one night
To rob the coal mine.

There's gamblin' down there.

The first half of the song is performed in this manner, the rest reverting to the altered twelve-bar form. The result is a ballad that is longer than a typical blues song, telling the complete story of Stagolee. Although this song and others are structured differently from a song such as Cotton's "Cotton Crop Blues," they are still considered blues. Whether written as a ballad or a twelve-bar blues, these forms have in common the feel and sound of the blues.

The structure and sound of the language still reinforce the blues themes introduced by the singer. Even in these few lines of Hurt's blues, we see again the sinking feeling portrayed in the way the language is used. The repetition of the word "down" pulls the listener down into the coal mine along with Stagolee. Hurt also lets the sound of his words determine the mood of the song. Like Cotton, he uses a repetition of the sad "o" sound in the words of Stagolee: "goes," "down," "coal," "one," "to" and "rob." Each of these words acts as a "blue note," dropping the sound of the language and giving it a sad tone.

II. Are Blues Poetry?

Once we have established that blues is primarily a lyric based form of music, an important question arises: Are blues lyrics poetry? While many poets have chosen to write in this form, and an increasing number of American literature anthologies are beginning to include a blues lyric section, there is still much debate as to whether or not blues are poetry. In fact, although he seems to argue in favor of blues as poetry, in his book Listen to the Blues, Bruce Cook fails to take a firm stand on the issue (29). While suggesting that blues are poetic by nature, he hesitates to actually say that the lyrics are indeed poetry. What Cook fails to say definitively is that the blues are not only a form of music, but indeed a strong form of poetry.

Why is it important to make this distinction between song lyrics and poetry? In many cases, song lyrics, while they may move us when we hear our favorite song on the radio, do not stand very well on their own. If the melody or tune is removed, the lyrics alone seem flat or simplistic and lose their ability to draw emotion from the reader/listener. At best, they are "bad" poetry. If we look, for example, at the lyrics of the Beatles' song "A

Hard Day's Night," we see that while musically sound, the lyrics do not stand alone as poetry:

It's been a hard day's night,
and I've been workin' like a dog.
It's been a hard day's night,
I should be sleepin' like a log.
But when I get home to you
I find the things that you do
Make me feel all right. (Beatles)

While the structure of the song demands repetition, such as a chorus, and even makes use of repeated words or phrases, and while this song uses a particular rhyme scheme, these features alone do not make it poetry.

So what does make a lyric or verse poetry? In their book Poetry, An Introduction, John Strachan and Richard Terry propose a definition of poetry. They say:

Poetry has a pattern, and in English poetry, the particular nature of that patterning, is characterized by sound. Poetry is a cultural form where the placing of words is driven by their sound as well as their sense of meaning.

(10)

The regularity of meter, a pattern of rhyme, and the way the sounds of the words are used to support their meanings

help distinguish poetry. If this definition is used, then all song lyrics, to some extent, can be considered poetry. By the nature of music, lyrics have a distinct rhythm which accompanies the song's melody. Many song lyrics also use some sort of rhyme scheme. However, most song lyrics are not considered "good" poetry.

One reason for this lies in their use of rhyme. Strachan and Terry go on to say, "rhyme can be seen as one of those poetic effects of which, in a successful poem, the reader should at the same time be both aware and not aware" (61). In other words, the effect of the rhyme pattern should be noticeable without drawing specific attention to the rhyme itself. Looking back at the Beatles song, while the lines are rhythmical and have a specific patterning, the use of rhyme is in no way subtle. The repeated phrase "like a" indicates to the reader that a rhyme word follows, focusing our attention on the device itself. While this technique works within a song, "good" poetry is more subtle, not drawing attention to its devices.

Another attribute I would propose as characteristic of "good" poetry is the inventiveness of its metaphors. In its use of figurative language, poetry should create original images and associations, rather than simply stringing several clichés together as often happens in a

song lyric. In "A Hard Day's Night," the lines lack the sort of vivid imagery one expects of poetry, relying instead on the use of several clichéd metaphors, such as "sleeping like a log." The lines also lack the depth of feeling that a poem achieves. The sound of the language itself, apart from the sung melody, does not reinforce the singer's emotion. While a song may indeed evoke a strong emotion in the listener, the same emotion is often lost when one simply reads the lyrics. Much of the emotional pull of a song lies in the instrumental as well as in the sound and/or strength of the singer's voice. When we read the lyrics to "A Hard Day's Night," we learn that the narrator has been working hard and is tired; when we hear the song, however, we are able to better grasp how hard the singer has been working and how tired he is. The strength and emotion of the singer's voice, along with the tempo and power of the instruments, adds an emotional strength to the words, one that is absent from the lyrics themselves.

Unlike song lyrics that depend on the singer and the musical accompaniment for their emotional effect, successful blues are rather poems *with* a musical accompaniment. The power and emotion of these songs comes from the poetic qualities of the lyrics themselves, with the twelve-bar form providing a structure similar to the

classical conventions of poetry. With the exception of the more modern free verse styles, traditional poetry follows specific forms. Each of these forms carries its own specific stanzaic structure, rhyme scheme and/or meter. While it is influenced by the blues form, "A Hard Day's Night" certainly has a pattern, but it does not completely fit into a specific traditional structure, as does a blues such as Lightning Hopkins's "Lonesome Dog Blues." In the traditional twelve-bar form, he sings:

I've got a dog in my backyard,

howls everyday my baby's gone.

I've got a dog in my backyard,

Oh Lord, howls everyday my baby's gone.

Yes he puts my mind to wonder,

how them things was going wrong. (Hopkins)

The feeling and emotional pull in these lines lies almost entirely in the structure and the lyrics. When the first line is repeated with the added phrase "Oh Lord," the effect is a pause, drawing attention to the power and emotion inherent in the initial line. Not only do we see that the narrator is aware of the dog howling because his baby is gone, but with the pause and repetition, we gain a clearer sense of both the dog's awareness, and the narrator's. The repeated line gains a heightened sense of

feeling and depth of emotion, before the final release of the third line. We can almost hear the dog's repeated howling, echoed in the sounds of the end rhymes: "gone," "gone," and "wrong." The speaker is not merely aware of the dog; the dog reminds him of his own pain, causing him to reflect on the reasons behind it, much as the listener is apt to "wonder" what has happened.

Repetition of this sort is common in both modern and traditional poetry, from Pablo Neruda's less structured "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines" to a highly structured villanelle, such as W. H. Auden's "If I Could Tell You." In the villanelle, the first and third lines are repeated at specific intervals throughout the poem. Line one becomes lines six, twelve, and eighteen while line three is repeated as lines nine, fifteen, and nineteen. Each of these lines changes in meaning each time it is repeated in respect to the context of the lines surrounding it. For example, in Auden's poem, the narrator says in lines two and three, "Time only knows the price we have to pay; / If I could tell you [the price] I would let you know." These lines suggest that the narrator cannot say what "price" he and the "you" in the poem will have to pay because he does not know what time knows. Line eight, however, gives the repeated line nine a different meaning.

The narrator continues, "Because I love you more than I can say, / If I could tell you [the future] I would let you know" (8-9). Here the line suggests that if it were at all possible, the narrator would tell "you" because he loves "you" so much. While the repeated line in a blues does not change in meaning, the villanelle form offers one precedent of a traditional poetic structure in which line repetition is a principle element.

The repetition in a poem such as Neruda's "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines," though less structured, functions in the same manner as a blues repetition. Each time the title line is repeated within the poem, the meaning does not change; however, the lines falling in between each repetition heighten the emotion of the repeated line. First introducing the line, "Tonight I can write the saddest lines," Neruda then provides an example of the sad lines he can write: "The night is shattered / and the blue stars shiver in the distance" (1-3). In this example, Neruda illustrates the sadness of his narrator. When the line is repeated, the reader has gained a sense of the emotion behind the sad lines, thus experiencing a greater depth of feeling when the line is repeated again as line five. The repetition forces the reader to return to the narrator's sadness. As he dwells on his sadness and it

deepens, we are spiraling down with him, the repetition keeping his sadness fresh in our minds as its meaning increases in intensity. Neruda continues to write "sad lines," less as examples than as reasons for his sadness: "I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too" (6). By describing what has happened to cause his sadness, the end of a relationship, Neruda has heightened the meaning of the repeated line yet again. By the time the repeated line is encountered again as line eleven, the reader has entered the mind of the narrator and is able to feel his pain and understand why he can write such sad lines. In Neruda's poem, the lines between the repeated line achieve the same effect as the "Oh Lord" in Hopkins's blues. They heighten the emotion behind the narrator's pain.

A strong structural tradition is not the only poetic aspect of the blues. Another is its vivid imagery. As I said before, while imagery in popular songs, or "bad" poetry, often falls into the use of clichés ("sleeping like a log"), successful blues lyrics develop fresh metaphors. Not only is the singer blue, but through the imagery, we see that the narrator's pain is so deep that even animals (such as Hopkins' dog) and nature can feel his despair. Likewise, while a "crying sky" may be somewhat conventional, the added image of tears rolling down the

street is fresh and inventive. Elmore James sings, "The sky is cryin', / look at the tears roll down the street. / I been lookin' for my baby, / and I wonder, where could she be." This image of the weeping sky does more than just provide a background and setting; it tells the listener that even the sky is filled with despair over the loss of his baby. This image also suggests the emotional state of the singer. He is in so much pain that the street is filled with tears. The strength of these images, like the structure, rests the emotional weight of the song on the lyrics, helping to make the blues personal, vivid and ultimately, more poetic.

In addition to the structure, imagery, and personal elements, an important poetic aspect of blues is its connection to American folklore or mythology. In the same way the ancient Greeks used the religion and mythology of their time as subjects in their poetry, so the blues singers use the religion and folklore of their time as their subject matter. Kimberly Benston says:

The Blues are for the bluesmen what the gods are for the Greeks and the heavens for the Christians: the omnipotent, all-pervading influence which good, evil, or indifferent, holds

in its power the destiny of its subject--all
mankind. (166)

This "all-pervading influence" becomes a sort of religion to the bluesman who has often lost faith or hope in God. The blues cry out to heaven and at times the devil, questioning and accusing both as causes for despair, much as the Greek gods served as both the cause of and relief from the troubles of the characters in ancient mythology.

The blues singer makes himself into a tragic hero, one who is trying to live, but who has troubles thrust upon him. Benston continues, saying that as the bluesman asserts himself as "a member of an outraged, isolated class; he seeks restoration of personal dignity and becomes tragic by further drawing himself out of his class through his poetry" (174). The bluesman's tragedy is that he is always on a quest, forever seeking this "restoration" of his dignity, his money, his woman, his freedom. These are his holy grail, and like the Knights of the Round Table, or Odysseus, the bluesman is always searching, if not for answers, for reasons.

By creating its own myths and mythic characters, the blues not only becomes part of American myth and folklore but also taps into the existing American mythology. Many blues take as their subject heroes from American, generally

black, folk stories. They make use of both positive heroes, such as John Henry, as well as negative heroes, or "badmen," like Stagolee, both of whom have tragic ends. In addition to using stock characters, such as John Henry and Stagolee, blues has also created its own mythology. Blues heroes travel not by ship, but by rail, and they often find themselves in mythical locations, such as the crossroads, where early bluesman Robert Johnson was said to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his unmatched skill on the guitar.

Myth and folklore have long been the subject of poetry, so it is no surprise that many blues use these subjects. In the same way that poetry was used by the ancient Greeks to sing the exploits of their mythic heroes, black Americans sing the exploits of their tragic folk heroes, using as their vehicle the tragic poetry of the blues. At the same time, blues that do not directly draw from the actual folklore help to build the myth of the bluesman as a tragic character.

Blues lyrics are indeed an important form of poetry, one with solid, vivid imagery, symbols, and a firm oral tradition. In addition, blues has a strong traditional structure, which suggests that we should consider this form of expression alongside traditional poetry. While many

critics and poets have chosen to ignore the importance of the blues form, a few have adopted it, and in doing so, further confirm the power and beauty of the blues lyric.

III. The Blues Poets

Having established a definition of the blues, as well as a foundation for reading blues lyrics as poetry, I will examine in subsequent chapters the traditional blues poetry of Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, and the "jazz" poetry of Jack Kerouac.

In chapter two I will examine Sterling Brown's blues poetry, showing how it holds true to the structure of blues lyrics as well as to the language of blues. Brown also recalls the folklore of the blues while creating his own modern folk heroes. By his mastery of the form, Brown promotes the argument that blues is a form of poetry. While many of his contemporaries criticized Brown for his love of the blues form, he held firm to his belief that not only his own writings but also blues itself is, in fact, poetic and deserve serious consideration as poetry.

Next, in chapter three, I will examine the poetry of Langston Hughes. Another writer from the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes, like Brown, uses the blues form in his work, yet his poetry can be seen as a more progressive form

of the blues. Hughes differs from Brown in that, while dialect is infused throughout Brown's blues, Hughes's blues are more literary and more refined in their use of language. However, while his language differs from Brown's, Hughes still captures the spirit and philosophy of the blues as well as many other blues poetic qualities, such as the use of folklore. Stylistically, many of Hughes's blues poems follow the blues form, yet in many of them we begin to see the influence of jazz working its way into his poetry.

Finally, in chapter four, I will look at the poetry of Jack Kerouac. Although Kerouac's poetry is almost entirely given over to the style of jazz (which I will examine later), he nevertheless refers to his poems as blues. And although he was heavily influenced by jazz, his poetry can be read as evolving from the traditional style of blues poetry, a development that begins with the jazz poems of Langston Hughes. While Kerouac does not follow the traditional blues form, he is nonetheless able to capture the mythic, poetic qualities of the blues philosophy in his writing. His poems create new American folk heroes and emphasize the personal desolation that is so much a part of the blues philosophy.

The relationship of blues and jazz is evident in the poetry of Brown, Hughes, and Kerouac. Both forms greatly influenced their work, shaping the way in which they approach poetry. In their tribute to blues, they strengthen the argument that blues lyrics may indeed be considered a form of poetry.

CHAPTER 2

"LAWD, LAWD, MY JAG IS DONE":

THE TRADITIONAL BLUES POETRY OF STERLING BROWN

As one of the early poets of the twentieth century, Sterling Brown was writing during a period of great loss. In the same way that Eliot looked to the past and to tradition in order to express himself through poetry, Brown looks back as well, but to a past and tradition quite different from the one Eliot recalled. While Eliot turned to the classics of the Western tradition, Brown turned to the roots of African American poetry, finding a strong tradition upon which to build his own poetry. Brown's poetry is anchored in the blues musical tradition, a tradition built on loss and suffering. His use of this tradition goes beyond simply using the blues form, for he also incorporates the philosophy and feel of the blues spirit into his work.

This is not to say, of course, that Sterling Brown ignored classic works of literature. Like Eliot, he incorporates classic elements into his poetry alongside the

American mythology and folklore that are such an important part of the blues. In his folk ballad, "Odyssey of Big Boy," Brown brings together both Greek and blues mythologies to form his own folk hero. As Robert O'Meally says, Brown

couples the name of the ancient Greek culture hero, Odysseus the shape changer, reveler, and dragon slayer, with that of the bluesman and badman Big Boy, the sometimes gentle but tough-if-you-crossed-him singer. (45)

As the poem progresses, Big Boy becomes a very Odysseus-like character. Brown's allusion to the Odyssey, however, performs several functions within the poem. As O'Meally points out, the allusion brings to mind Odysseus, but it also shows Brown's awareness of the importance of myth in blues.

Brown's title, "Odyssey of Big Boy," establishes the mythic tone for the poem, and his opening lines are mythic as well. Brown's poem begins:

Lemme be wid Casey Jones

Lemme be wid Stagolee

Lemme be wid such like men

When Death takes hol' on me,

When Death takes hol' on me. (1-5)

Brown is aware, as is his narrator Big Boy, of the mythical influence that is integral to the blues. Big Boy wants to be with the badmen of American folklore when he dies. He mentions Casey Jones, Stagolee--who would kill a man for touching his hat--Jazzbo, and "John Henry, steel drivin' man" (Brown 63). These badmen were sometimes killers, sometimes lovers, but it was "the ability to face hardship and to win" that makes them such an important part of American folklore and blues mythology (O'Meally 44).

Big Boy's eagerness to be a part of this mythology is enhanced by the structure of the stanza. Not only is each line short, but the words making up each line are shortened as well. Brown's use of the shortened "Lemme" and "wid," separated by only the short "be," suggests the eagerness of Big Boy's desire by speeding our pronunciation of the words. There is also a lightness to the internal rhyme pattern--"Lemme," "be," "Stagolee," "Casey," and "me"--complimenting the eager feel of the lines. This eagerness can be seen in the rhythm of the lines as well. In the first three lines, Brown uses a trochaic meter ending with a dactylic foot. The effect of the trochaic meter is a light, quick rhythm leading to each heroic name. The meter slows at the end of each line. The dactylic foot halts the

eagerness of the lines, providing instead, a reverent pause for Stagolee, Casey Jones, and "such like men."

The last two lines of the stanza take a slightly different tone. Brown changes the rhythm to an iambic meter. The effect is a softer feel, slowing the line down as Big Boy reflects on his own death. The line is repeated, allowing the reader to, like Big Boy, pause for a moment and consider the reality of the lines. While the tone has become darker, the repeated "e" sound at the ends of the two lines pulls us back to the internal rhymes of the previous lines. This repetition recalls not only the eagerness of the lines, suggesting that the death may not be so bad, but also Brown's use of "me" further connects Big Boy with the heroes, placing him in the same physical position within the line as them. He feels he is one of the mythic badmen, and Brown emphasizes this by his placement of Big Boy literally alongside these men on the page.

Unlike the oppressed bluesman who laments his despair, the badman seeks to overcome his oppression, or if this does not work, to simply lash out at his oppressors. As Odysseus struggled against the gods, the badmen struggled against white oppression and the despair of the blues.

As I have already suggested, blues not only uses these types of myths, but often creates its own. In this tradition, Sterling Brown is creating his own blues myth within "Odyssey of Big Boy." The protagonist of this poem is based on Brown's friend Big Boy Davis, a blues musician. Brown, however, turns Davis into a mythical badman in the poem. Brown's Big Boy asks to be with these other mythical figures when he dies. If he is to join them, Big Boy's story must be told, and in the second stanza, he begins to narrate his own tale:

Done skinned as a boy in Kentucky hills,
 Druv steel dere as a man,
 Done stripped tobacco in Virginia fiel's
 Alongst de River Dan,
 Alongst de River Dan. (6-10)

Big Boy begins his story with his childhood and quickly moves to his first job as a grown man, driving steel, foreshadowing the mythic John Henry with whom he wants to be associated at the end of the poem. These first few jobs are by no means the end of his tale, however. In the fashion of early blues ballads, Brown provides a detailed account of Big Boy's life in Big Boy's own voice. Brown has said that "earlier folk blues were broad and frank,

Chaucerian" (292). "Odyssey of Big Boy" is indeed worthy of being placed in this category.

In a "broad and frank" monologue worthy of the Canterbury Tales, Big Boy details his career and hardships. He has done everything from mining coal to slinging hash, working eleven jobs in as many states. This account of Big Boy's work history shows how hard his life has been. Some jobs he liked but had to leave: "Liked dat job jes' fine, / Till a load o' slate curved roun' my head, / Won't work in no mo' mines" (12-14). Other jobs were beneath him, threatening his dignity: "Done busted suds in li'l New York, / Which ain't no work o' mine, / Lawd, ain't no work o' mine" (28-30). Big Boy's work history not only gives the reader a rich, detailed account of his hard life but also picks up the theme of restlessness introduced by the inclusion of The Odyssey in the title. Like Odysseus, Big Boy has wandered through his world and endured many hardships. The lines are restless as well, wandering in and out as they flow across the page. It is his ability to endure and overcome these hardships that will help ensure Big Boy's place in folk history, alongside the other badmen he admires.

Big Boy tells us how he has distracted himself from his problems as his narrative moves away from work and on

to another important aspect of his life. Big Boy continues:

Done worked and loafed on such like jobs,
 Seen what dey is to see,
 Done had my time wid a pint on my hip,
 An' a sweet gal on my knee,
 Sweet mommer on my knee. (31-35)

While love is an important theme in many blues, so are lust and womanizing, especially in the mythology of the badmen. Big Boy is a womanizer who has a different woman in every town, and several in some states. His womanizing becomes a pleasurable hobby in contrast to his hard work life. The change in theme is reflected in Brown's choice of language. When Big Boy talked about his jobs, he used hard or sharp sounding words, such as "skimmed," "Kentucky," "steel" and "slate." In this transition stanza, the sounds of work become drawn out and slow. Brown uses the long sounding words ("done," "worked," "loafed" and "jobs"), adding to the statement a hint of boredom. As the theme turns to women, the language Brown uses is markedly different from the "work" language. The words "sweet," "gal," "mommer" and "knee" are softer, lighter than the words used to describe labor. The changing sounds of the words themselves suggest the change of Big Boy's tone as his

theme changes from hard labor to the more pleasant topic of women.

Big Boy continues his story by listing his women in the same fashion that he listed his jobs, by location. As with his jobs, there were some women he liked and some he did not: "Had Creole gal in New Orleans, / Sho Gawd did two time me-- / Lawd two time, fo' time me" (43-45). This womanizing clinches Big Boy's place as one of the true blues badmen.

Not as good as John Henry, not as bad as Stagolee, Big Boy falls somewhere between these two heroes. He has been down, but endured, has cheated and been cheated on, but like a true badman, Big Boy has lived his life without hesitation or apologies:

Done took my livin' as it came,
 Done grabbed my joy, done risked my life;
 Train done caught me on de trestle,
 Man done caught me wid his wife,
 His doggone purty wife. (51-55)

Big Boy accepts his life and knows that he has made the most of it; rather than make excuses, he revels in his sins as he remembers the man's "purty wife." Big Boy has a dark awareness that his journey through life is coming to an end, but he bears that awareness stoically, once again

overcoming his blues when he says, "Can't do much complainin' / When my jag is done, / Lawd, Lawd, my jag is done" (58-60). In the end, all he wants is to be with his heroes, the badmen. Big Boy's last request is granted in the form of Brown's poem, which records his deeds and establishes him among the gallery of black folk heroes. In the reader's mind, Big Boy becomes one of the badmen, as powerful and enduring a character as any of them.

Throughout this broad and mythic adventure, Brown's poem never loses the blues feel, and Big Boy's life is layered with traditional blues themes: hard labor, cheating, womanizing, restlessness, and death. While "Odyssey of Big Boy" keeps with these traditional themes and shows the importance of a mythic tradition in blues, it is a ballad rather than a blues in the traditional twelve-bar form. Many of Sterling Brown's other poems, however, are written in the traditional blues style, expressing many of these same themes in the concise, vivid structure of blues poetry.

Brown cannot, however, leap into the traditional twelve-bar form without giving some attention to the roots of the form. Lorenzo Thomas states, "in fact, Brown's poetics document an attitude toward tradition that is not very different than the one held by the blues singers

themselves" (409). He documents this attitude by paying attention to where the blues came from. I stated previously that blues grew out of several forms, including the worksong. By using the worksong format in his poem "Southern Road," Brown not only captures the heart and soul of the chain gang but also provides us with a glimpse of the tradition behind the twelve-bar form.

In "Southern Road," the call and answer format of the worksong, which eventually evolves into the repetition of the twelve-bar blues, is readily apparent. A leader could call the first two lines, and the other workers could answer as a chorus repeating the lines before the leader finishes the thought:

Swing dat hammer--hunh--

Steady bo';

Swing dat hammer--hunh--

Steady bo';

Ain't no rush, bebbly,

Long ways to go. (1-6)

In the same manner that the chain gang used these songs to set the pace for their work, Brown uses the workers' "hunh," as they swing their hammers, to set the rhythm of the poem. The grunt not only adds a realistic element, bringing the reader to the location, but also breaks the

lines, emphasizing the second part of the phrase. It is a "kind of metrical and rhythmical insistence" (Jones 68). If this worksong were to evolve into a blues, the line might read: "Swing dat hammer, oh Lord / steady bo'." Structurally, "Southern Road" hints at the blues form, providing a structural blueprint for the evolution of the form. Although the stanzas of Brown's worksong are six lines long, as opposed to the three-line blues stanza, the pattern of repetition suggests the traditional twelve-bar form. Connecting lines one and two, lines three and four, and lines five and six would create the three-line stanza of the blues form, with lines one and two repeating as line three finishes the thought.

As I said, however, Brown's poem only hints at the blues form. The lines are significantly shorter than a typical blues line. Rather than the long, flowing lament of a blues line, Brown creates long pauses in the flow of the worksong. Each line has an end stop. Lines one and three use the grunt to stop the line with the swinging of the hammer. Lines two and four begin with the word "steady," as an instruction not only to the chain gang, but to the reader as well. Brown suggests a steady reading of the very short line. Rather than reading one line quickly and jumping to the next, we pause at the semicolon before

moving slowly and steadily forward. In line five, Brown sets the last word aside, allowing a pause both before and after. The effect gives "bebby" the same function as "hunh"--setting the rhythm, causing the reader to keep the same steady pace throughout the poem.

Structure is not the only aspect of the poem that shows its roots in the blues. Less like a badman ballad, Brown's poem leans more towards the true blues, with the leader lamenting his hard life and the fact that he will be in prison for "Evahmo'." As the poem progresses, we begin to see how the worksong incorporated thematic aspects of the blues as well as the structure. In addition to the chain gang aspect of the poem, Brown touches on several themes that are not specific to prison life. The speaker feels not only the curse of his father but also the sting of racial persecution: "White man tells me--hunh-- / Damn yo' soul" (31-32). While we are never told why the narrator is in prison, this line hints at possible wrongful imprisonment, which becomes a major theme not only in worksongs but also in blues.

Brown also demonstrates the humanity of the chain gang member by showing what is truly important to the narrator. In doing so, Brown also shows another important technique of the blues: the double entendre. The worker sings:

Double shackled--hunh--
 Guard behin';
 Ball an' chain, bebbby,
 On my min'. (27-30)

While it is obvious that the literal ball and chain are on his mind, the narrator is dealing with a deeper issue. Blues often use words or phrases with double meanings, usually resulting in some sort of sexual innuendo. In Brown's poem, however, the narrator is thinking about his wife and unborn child. Brown writes "Burner tore his - hunh- / Black heart away," and in the next stanza "Wife's in de ward -hunh- / Babe's not yet bo'n" (7-8, 17-18). The ball and chain on his leg becomes symbolic of the ball and chain on his heart, which he has been stripped of along with his freedom.

"Southern Road" is important because it shows how the traditional blues form has evolved from its roots in the worksong. But whereas a chorus answers the leader in the worksong, in Brown's poem the speaker answers himself, making the blues much more personal. The shared experience of the chain gang becomes in the blues form, the personal, isolated experience of one troubled soul. Yet even in the worksong, thematic elements of the blues began to emerge. While the workers of a chain gang experience circumstances

similar to one another, and therefore have probably all left someone behind, the narrator of "Southern Road" expresses a more personal loss, the loss of his wife. As he becomes solitary, moving away from the gang, so his words become more personal and move away from the worksong into the blues.

In his poetry, Sterling Brown not only documents the traditions behind the blues, but captures the essence of the blues itself. While writing many poems in the traditional twelve-bar form, such as "Low Down," Brown, like many writers of the early twentieth century, writes of alienation and despair. While paralleling the modern themes of writers such as Eliot, Joyce, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, Brown's traditional blues poetry taps into an isolation that precedes the twentieth century. The blues, having grown out of the cultural isolation of African Americans within the United States, show that African Americans were experiencing the issues raised by modernists long before the First World War.

Sterling Brown realizes these themes in his blues poetry, and using the strength of the blues form, he discusses the disillusionment of the late nineteenth, early twentieth-century black man. "Low Down" begins,

So low down bummin' cut plug from de passers by,

So low down bummin' cut plug from de passers by,
 When a man bum tobacco

ain't much lef' to do but die. (1-3)

While the lines are short in "Southern Road," here, in the twelve-bar form, they are longer, allowing Brown's language to flow, creating a "low down" feeling. The music of the language sets the tone as Brown uses long vowel sounds and mainly monosyllabic words: "so low down bummin' cut plug from de passers by" (1). The effect is a slower pace in the rhythm of the lines, also suggested by the first two words that almost say "slow." Line three of Brown's poem is a metrical foot longer than lines one and two, further drawing out the slow pace of his blues. The long lines in "Low Down" perform a function similar to the long pauses in "Southern Road." They pace the readers, giving them time to feel the sadness of the words' meaning as well as their sound.

The sadness we feel in the structure is at the core of this poem. The narrator's blues run deep, and at the center of them is his lack of money. He cannot even afford tobacco and is reduced to asking strangers for it. The narrator is so low, so poor, that he has lost his dignity and has to beg. With the loss of his dignity, he has nothing left to live for and is resigned to death. The

narrator's despair becomes compounded as Brown shows that blues is more than simply a lament about being poor. Brown includes several traditional blues themes throughout "Low Down." Poverty is only one of the narrator's problems, but it is his lack of money that causes his tremendous loss. The narrator experiences a loss of dignity, but also a loss of health, family, faith, luck, and, as Brown will reveal, in the end, the ability to leave it all behind.

In touching on each of these "losses," Brown uses the vivid imagery so closely associated with the blues. Brown's metaphors are far from clichéd. They are original and inventive, painting a clear image that is locked in the reader's mind. As the narrator tells of his loss of health, Brown introduces a personification of death, a technique common in blues lyrics. The narrator laments, "Bone's getting' brittle, an' my brain won't let me rest, / Death drivin rivets overtime in my scooped out chest" (5-6). We learn that his health is poor, his bones brittle and his chest hollow. This last image suggests not only his hunger, his loss of physical substance, but also his loss of heart, of emotional strength. He is dwelling on his troubles. The narrator is tired and weary, but unable to rest because he is thinking too much. It is in these thoughts that Death becomes a steel driver, pounding rivets

constantly into the narrator's hollow chest. Like Big Boy, the narrator here is aware that death is at hand and working "overtime" to wear him down.

The narrator's next loss informs the reader that he is alone in his troubles, having lost those closest to him, his family. Brown writes, "Woman done quit me, my boy lies fast in jail" (7). Although we do not know why his wife has left him--whether for money, another man, or, as in many blues, both--the reason is not important. What matters is the narrator's isolation. His woman is gone, and that is what causes his pain. On top of his wife's departure, his son is in jail. Again we are not told why. However, it is both the loss of this close relationship and the narrator's inability to act that are key to his blues. While his wife was his lover, his son was his friend. This friendship is made apparent in the change from "my boy" to "pa'dner" when the line is repeated. This change emphasizes the importance of the father/son relationship, telling us that the son is not only his boy, but his partner, his friend. Lack of money has destroyed this relationship as well, for the narrator tells us that he "Kin bum tobacco but I cain't bum de jack for bail" (9). He is unable to act, unable to help his son and restore the relationship, leaving himself alone.

This sense of isolation and alienation culminates in the narrator's loss of faith. While many writers early in the twentieth century were dealing with the loss of God or religious faith, the blues had been doing so for decades. For example, in his song "Burnin' Hell," John Lee Hooker sings, "Ain't no heaven / Ain't no burnin' hell" (Titon 39). Using this old blues theme, Brown attributes his character's loss of faith, once again, to poverty. Brown writes: "Church don't help me, got no show off Sunday clothes, / Preachers and deacons, don't look to get no help from those" (11-12). The narrator has been excluded from the church, and for no reason other than the fact that he cannot afford dress clothes to wear on Sunday. He becomes disillusioned with the church, feeling that it does not care about the poor, or, more specifically, about him. The narrator does not believe the church will help him, and in a sense, he isolates himself from any feeling of community that religious faith might provide. Assuming that he will be turned away because he is not wearing the right clothes, he does not even ask the preachers for help, nor does he make a plea to God on his own behalf.

By the fifth stanza, the narrator has described a great deal of loss. Near the end of his story, he gives up and submits to his blues. He states matter of factly:

Wouldn't mind dyin'
 but I ain't got de jack fo' toll,
 Wouldn't mind dyin'
 but I'd have to bum de jack fo' toll,
 Some dirty joker done put a jinx
 on my po' soul. (13-15)

Here Brown's blues hints at the mythic: the narrator who is ready to die does not have the money to pay for his trip across the river into the underworld. Although Death has been wearing him down, when he finally submits, the narrator has lost even the ability to die. Experiencing his final loss, he perceives his misfortune as a cruel joke that has resulted in the loss of any luck he once may have had.

In the end, the narrator realizes that while life may be a gamble, he has been cheated and stripped of any chance at success. He proclaims, "Dice are loaded, de deck's all marked to hell, / Whoever runs dis gamble sholy runs it well" (17-18). The alliteration of the "d" sound in line seventeen creates a hard quick rhythm that underscores the bitterness of the line. Line eighteen, however, uses smoother sounds, as in "whoever" and "sholy," which, after the sharp, fast pace of the preceding line, show the narrator's resignation. The bitterness subsides into a

feeling of hopelessness. The game of life has been rigged against him, and there is no way he can win at anything, not even death. His final statement acknowledges that there is some higher power, whether it be God, the Devil, or merely fate, that has set him up to lose. As in many blues lyrics, Brown's poem leaves the reader with a fatalistic sense of hopelessness.

While "Low Down" is certainly a poem about being poor, Brown also includes many other traditional blues subjects. From being abandoned by higher powers, to being cheated, to being left by a wife or lover, the narrator is subject to numerous hardships. Any one of these items might cause one to feel the blues, but the grief here transcends this feeling, bringing us in touch with a much deeper blues: a despair for which there is no hope.

Not all of Sterling Brown's blues poems are this bleak however. "Tin Roof Blues" is another example of Brown's use of the traditional blues structure, and this poem too explores another pervasive theme of the blues: that of restlessness and wandering. In "Odyssey of Big Boy," it is quite clear that Big Boy is, like Odysseus and many other mythic figures, a restless soul. As the line blurs between artist and character, this restlessness becomes an important characteristic of the bluesman's mythos. In his

song "Traveling Blues," T-Bone Walker sings, "So sorry, so sorry baby, that I've got to go, / By this time tomorrow Darlin', I'll be a long ways down the road." The singer has no destination, and does not know how far he will have traveled, but he feels the need to move "on down the road." Although the singer in this song wants to settle down, he has wandered all his life and has no place to go. Therefore, he is compelled to continue his wandering.

Because it is such an important part of the blues, it is no surprise that the theme of wandering appears more than once in Brown's poetry. In his article, "The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown," Stephen Henderson says "the theme of wandering is a powerful one in folk literature and occupies a prominent place in the blues and the ballads and the tales which nurtured the art of Sterling Brown" (35). "Tin Roof Blues" takes this wanderlust as its theme, with Brown using the traditional blues form of escape, the railroad:

I'm goin' where de Southern

crosses top de C. & O.

I'm goin' where de Southern

crosses top de C. & O.

I'm goin' down de country

cause I can't stay here no mo'. (1-3)

Brown's words not only provide the means for escape, but also the sound of escape. Each line of the stanza, an iambic heptameter, is consistent in length and rhythm. The hard consonant rhythm of the "c's," "t's," and "d's" working together with the steady meter of each line imitates the sound of a train "clicking" along the tracks. This effect is consistent throughout the poem, reinforcing the theme of escape and wandering. Brown's narrator here, unlike T-Bone Walker's wanderer who is tired and wishing for a home, has not yet begun his travels. Instead, he is living in a place he needs to get away from. He can no longer bear to stay in this "dirty city" (7). He longs instead to be in the country "where de people stacks up mo' lak friends" (6).

The narrator has grown weary of living with gangs of gamblers and numbers runners. Not afraid of working hard, he simply wants to go to a place where he can "Git down to de livin' what a man kin understand" (9). Brown writes of an honest man whose blues are derived from a dishonest city. His desire to hop a train to the country is caused by his need to escape the harshness of the city. Brown ends with a decree of determination: "De tin roof blues, dese lonesome sidewalks on my mind, / I'm goin' where de shingles covers people mo' my kind" (14-15). Like Big Boy,

Walker's wanderer, and so many others, the narrator of "Tin Roof Blues" is driven away from home by his blues.

Brown's capturing of this desire to escape or wander, as well as the other themes I have discussed so far, are an essential part of his poetry. These themes are the keys to the blues philosophy, creating the tone of despair and loss.

In addition to his understanding of the blues philosophy, history, and structure, it is Brown's use of language that makes his poetry so striking. The critic James Weldon Johnson "declared that dialectic poetry was fundamentally limited to the expression of humor and pathos" (Gates 1210). However, Brown's use of dialect, coupled with the form of his poems, adds a sense of realism that is hard to find elsewhere. Lorenzo Thomas notes that "among the formal qualities of the blues, Brown's study also focused on language and dialect" (411). Having grown out of the oral tradition of southern black America, blues has a distinct style of language, a dialect unique to the poor under-educated black Americans who were both the subjects and creators of the blues. Brown's use of dialect captures the sound and rhythm of the speech of the blues culture. Although criticized by many, Brown's use of this southern black dialect brings to life the characters he is

creating by giving them a voice, and brings the reader to the heart of the South where these stories are taking place.

If we look, for instance at a line from "Tornado Blues," the importance of language in Brown's poetry becomes clear. The last line of the poem reads:

Lawd help de folks what de wind
ain't had no mercy on. (18)

We are at once transported to the South and implanted in the plight of a poor black man who has survived the destruction of a tornado. The fact that he is not speaking "proper" English helps to further develop his character. His poverty can be attributed to a lack of education, which has kept him from the better jobs. Instead, he has worked hard, laboring for his home that is now lost.

The line would have had a much different feel if the dialect were removed. Rather than the poor, Southern man, a much different character would emerge:

Lord, help the people on whom
the wind has had no mercy.

No longer do we feel that the speaker has experienced a loss. Instead, we hear the Harvard-educated poet speaking, or perhaps one of the rich mansion owners of the poem, whom the tornado has spared. The re-written line might evoke

our sympathy, but it does not create a sense of personal pain or loss. And of course, without this personal loss, the blues quality of the line would be lost. Instead, Brown uses the language of a people, of a place, of a poetic form, thus allowing us to hear the echoes of the blues in his speakers' voices.

As a poet, Sterling Brown has a great understanding and thorough command of blues forms and themes. He has studied the genre closely, and he understands its depth and power. While his blues poems might easily be set to music and sung, they stand alone as insightful and intricate works of poetry steeped in both thematic and structural tradition. His use of myth not only connects his poetry to the blues but also documents the importance of myth to the literary tradition of the blues itself. Brown's mastery of the blues form and philosophy not only allowed him to speak for a people, but also served to prove the strength and depth inherent in the blues lyric.

CHAPTER 3

"OUT TO STONY LONESOME GROUND":

THE PROGRESSIVE BLUES OF LANGSTON HUGHES

While Sterling Brown was writing to capture the essence of both the blues and the people it belonged to, another poet of the Harlem Renaissance was also using the form of the blues lyric. Like Brown, Langston Hughes realized the strength of the blues lyric and used the blues forms in much the same way that Brown did. While capturing the feel and philosophy of the blues in his poetry, Hughes, however, began to pull away from the gritty realism and tradition of Brown's blues, choosing instead to write a more polished, literary blues. Reflecting a more commercially popular style of blues, Hughes's use of a more sophisticated structure and language helped to make his poetry more acceptable to the literary community. At the same time, however, the form still allowed him to explore the complex themes of the blues, and blues became his connection to the common people for whom he wished to speak. While using the blues form in his poetry, Langston

Hughes, like Brown, supports the depth and strength of the blues lyric, even as his style evolves into a more jazz-like structure.

Many of Hughes's blues poems are written in the traditional twelve-bar form. Hughes, however, changes the form slightly. Brown held true to the form in his poetry, writing the three-line stanzas typical of the blues lyric. In Brown's poetry, the long lines carry readers slowly through the blues form in a slow progression. As we can see by looking at his poem "Suicide," Hughes breaks the form into a six-line stanza:

Ma sweet good man has
 Packed his trunk and left.
 Ma sweet good man has
 Packed his trunk and left.
 Nobody to love me:
 I'm gonna kill ma self. (1-6)

Hughes alters the traditional form, dividing each line into two. Line one of a traditional twelve-bar blues becomes lines one and two in Hughes's poem, with line two becoming lines three and four, and line three becoming lines five and six.

While it might seem that this breaking down of the twelve-bar form might weaken the blues form, the opposite

is in fact true. The form is strengthened. As we can see, Hughes keeps the repeated line while simply making his stanza appear on the page more like a traditional poem than a blues lyric. Edward Waldron says of Hughes's blues poetry, "his poems have the rhythm and the impact of the musical form they incorporate" (140). Although the poem does not resemble a twelve-bar lyric on the page, Hughes has altered the structure in such a way that the rhythm of the form is evident as the poem is read. In many blues, the singer gives a slight pause in the middle of each line of verse. Hughes's lineation allows his poem to create this pause for readers, since there is no performer to do it for them.

For example, the longer, traditional first line of the blues form is divided when Hughes writes: "Ma sweet good man has / packed his trunk and left" (1-2). Rather than the long, slow sinking feeling created by the longer line, the effect Hughes creates breaks the flow, further emphasizing the emotion of the second half of the thought. Because there is a break after "has," the reader tends to stop, if only momentarily, before discovering what the man has done. Hughes emphasizes the reason for the narrator's pain much in the way a blues singer does, pausing in the middle of the line to emphasize his despair and longing.

If we take a closer look at the poem itself, we see that while the structure has changed, Hughes holds true to the spirit of the blues. Again, as in many of Brown's blues, the subject is a lover who has gone away. Hughes, however, takes a different approach to the subject. The first noticeable difference is the narrator. While Brown's narrators are generally men, Hughes chooses in many of his blues to create a female narrator, honoring the tradition of female blues singers, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. In doing so, Hughes creates a wider range of characters than Brown does. He reminds us that women feel the blues just as deeply as men do. For Hughes the blues are not masculine, they are human. Although blues was later dominated by men, many of the earliest and most popular performers were women.

Another important aspect of Hughes's poem is the darkness of its subject matter. Brown's poetry generally deals with loss, sadness, or the need to wander. While Brown does deal with the violence of nature, it is Hughes who delves into human violence and reaches a level of despair much deeper than Brown's. The narrator of "Suicide" does not wish for her man to return, nor does she seek any distraction or cure for her blues. Instead, she seems to realize the futility of any distraction and the

hopelessness of her situation. For many of Brown's narrators, death seems always just around the corner, but there is an acceptance and sometimes even a lightness in this realization. Blues becomes a way of dealing with one's mortality, a form of escapism through which the sadness of the singer's end is transformed into relief. For the speaker of "Suicide," however, death seems imminent: "I'm gonna kill ma self" (6). Killing herself is the only way she can deal with her blues. While many find the railroads an escape, she finds death.

For the narrator of "Suicide," her means of escape quickly reveals itself as death, and while it is the nature of blues to be melancholy, some lyrics, as becomes apparent in this poem, take us to a much deeper level of desolation than do others. Edward Waldron says:

One has the feeling that the mood of the blues is always one step away from death--either murder or suicide--and that the presence of the blues form makes it possible for the anguished one to direct his sorrow inward into song and find happiness in the release. (140)

The repetitive structure of the blues form provides the singer/poet with time and opportunity to flush this sorrow from his mind. Although still dwelling on his sorrow, the

bluesman vocalizes this personal grief, allowing him to share his burden with others. Because the nature or cause of his blues is repeated in the first two lines of the stanza, the release of the third line becomes all the more a relief from the burden being carried.

The function of Hughes's blues structure in "Suicide" is slightly different. Rather than finding relief in the final release, the narrator's grief instead becomes intensified. After the speaker repeats that her man has "packed his trunk and left," the relief one expects in lines five and six is absent (2). Death appears to be less than "one step away." By ending line five with a colon, Hughes places a greater emphasis on line six, in which his narrator cries, "I'm gonna kill ma self." By letting this last thought stand alone, Hughes reveals not only the narrator's acceptance of her fate but also how serious she is about embracing it.

In the second stanza of "Suicide," the speaker is planning to buy a knife, although she has not yet decided how she will use it. She asks, "Shall I carve ma self or / That man that done me wrong?" (11-12). While she obviously wants to kill herself, her desire to kill her man is significant. Line twelve, in subtle blues fashion, reveals a much deeper level of her anguish. In the darkest of the

blues, jealousy and murder are a common pair. Her man did not simply go away, leaving her with the hope that he could return or that she might be able to go after him. Rather she has lost hope because he has wronged her by leaving her for another woman.

In the end, however, the woman is overcome by her blues. The narrator seems to have given up the idea of murder, and opted instead simply to silence her blues. She says:

'Lieve I'll jump in de river
Eighty-nine feet deep.
Cause de river's quiet
An' a po', po' gal can sleep. (15-18)

Rather than buying the knife and killing her man, or stabbing herself, she has decided to take the most peaceful way out she can think of. The exaggerated depth of the river serves to prove her resolve. She wants to make sure the river is deep enough to do its job, as well as deep enough to give her a quiet resting place far from this world.

Hughes not only exaggerates the depth of the river; by using the blues form, he locks the image in the reader's mind. The depth of the river appears at the beginning of lines thirteen and fifteen, each following the word "river"

which ends the preceding line. By breaking the line after "river," Hughes creates a pause, which draws our attention to the depth: "Eighty-nine feet deep" (14). When the word "river" is repeated a third time in line seventeen, the stanza's release, the depth of the river, now associated with the word "river," is repeated in the reader's mind. The river is quiet because it is so deep. The narrator can sink to a depth where she can find peace, and the reader is reminded, by the repetition, how deep she has sunk. The blues don't get much darker than this. While using the blues form to express the violence of the modern world and the anguish of a woman in pain, Hughes has provided an example of just how dark the blues can be. Blues can express the deepest despair and the darkest hours, and Hughes's "Suicide" does just that.

Langston Hughes did not merely explore this one aspect of the blues, however. He realized that blues express a wide range of emotion: one blues may seem utterly hopeless, another may contain elements of humor. While there is always a quality of sadness to the blues, that sadness is sometimes treated lightly. Just as singing can be a release from the weight of the blues, humor can also fight them off. Hughes's "403 Blues" shows an effective use of humor in a blues poem. The poem begins, "You lucky to be a

spider / Cause it's bad luck to kill you" (1-2). After repeating the lines, the speaker continues, "But if you wasn't a spider / Your day would sure be through" (5-6). The poem opens with the humorous scene of a man talking to and warning a spider. As Brown personified death, here Hughes's narrator personifies the spider, giving himself someone to blame and to take out his anger on. Death is still lurking in the background of this blues, but far from the despair of "Suicide," it is not the man or his lover who is in danger. It is a spider whose only protection is superstition.

As the poem continues, the narrator proclaims that he is feeling evil and threatens the spider. He says, "Don't cross my path no mo', spider / Cause this ain't crossin' time" (11-12). His aggravation grows as he talks to the spider in an effort to clear his head, and he reaches the point at which the threat of bad luck may no longer matter. By the close of the poem, however, the speaker realizes that the spider is not the cause of his frustration. We are finally given the source of the blues that have made him feel so violent. He asks the spider:

Why do you s'pose my baby left me

When I got my 403?

I reckon, all the time she

Must not have cared for me. (15-18)

No longer threatening, the man turns to the spider for answers. He realizes that his baby did not even like him enough to stay around when he got his money, and this realization introduces the sadness of this blues. The sadness is downplayed, however, by humor. Hughes's use of the humorous aspect of blues reveals another layer of this complex form. While blues has many themes, there are an equal number of ways that these themes are handled. Hughes realized this, and his poetry adds to our understanding of the range of mood and depth of blues.

As I discussed in the last chapter, Sterling Brown attempted to capture the very essence of the blues style, tradition, and language. Hughes takes a slightly different approach to blues in much of his poetry. I have already mentioned that he breaks up the lines of the traditional form, creating a pause that emphasizes the second half of the blues line. The effect also gives Hughes's blues stanzas a look that is more poetically traditional in appearance than is the long three-line stanzas of the twelve-bar form. Not only does his verse form resemble more traditional western styles, but his language is much more polished as well. His poem "Stony Lonesome"

illustrates how Hughes not only alters the form further but also removes most traces of dialect from the language.

The poem begins:

They done took Cordelia
 Out to stony lonesome ground.
 Done took Cordelia
 To stony lonesome,
 Laid her down.
 They done put Cordelia
 Underneath that
 Grassless mound. (1-8)

Here Hughes has further broken down the form, breaking the fourth and seventh lines, extending the traditional lines of the twelve-bar form into eight lines. As the form breaks down, making the poem longer, the words are laid further down on the page as Cordelia is laid in the ground. There is no stanza break within the poem either. Instead, the verses of this blues are interrupted by an exclamation ("Ay-Lord") repeated over three lines (9). This phrase is staggered across the page, further creating the sinking effect of the body being lowered into the grave.

The language also differs from Brown's. Whereas Brown's use of dialect fully captures the pronunciation and speech patterns of the black culture he is writing about,

Hughes hints at the dialect without using it exclusively.

Gayl Jones states:

Hughes's use of blues as poetic model enables him to break from dialect, to maintain a sense of the syntax, vocabulary, imagery, metaphors, and expressive rhythms of a different vernacular and linguistic tradition, but without the caricature.

(24)

In "Stony Lonesome," Hughes's use of the word "done" hints at the syntax of the blues dialect, but he keeps the rest of the language more refined. For example, Hughes chooses "They," whereas Brown might have used "De," and "Lord" instead of "Lawd." Hughes continues to hint at the speech of his character in the second half of the poem, using "Po'" and "Lordy." However, the language of the poem is more refined and, as Jones suggests, is based less in caricature than the language typically found in Brown's poetry. By choosing to move away from the use of dialect, Hughes distances his narrator from the action of the poem. The narrator becomes an outsider, sympathizing, while the sorrow belongs to Cordelia's husband, "Po' Buddy Jones" (14).

Hughes's language is generally more elevated than Brown's and is therefore seen by many as more "literary."

While Brown had difficulties finding a publisher for his work, Hughes succeeded. And critics generally find Hughes's literary blues more acceptable than Brown's traditional blues. Hughes's turn to a more literary style reflects the more commercial form of blues music that brought the style its popularity. Stephen Tracy notes that "this preference for a more sophisticated vaudeville-type approach fostered by the prevalence of that style in Harlem is markedly noticeable in the form and content of many of Hughes's blues poems" (77).

Writing poetry closer to the blues of W. C. Handy than to that of Robert Johnson, Hughes became a voice *for* a people, rather than the voice *of* a people as Brown was. Through Brown's use of dialect, his narrators became voices from the lower social class of which they were members. In using a more literary approach to blues, only hinting at the dialect, Hughes still speaks out for this same group of people, but distances himself somewhat from them. Hughes was very enamored with his own black culture yet because of his education, he felt he was an outsider, alienated from his own race (Rampersad 22). Hughes makes his race the subject of his poetry, but his alienation from it is reflected in the stance of the narrator in "Stony

Lonesome," concerned with Buddy and Cordelia, but removed from their situation.

Although Hughes uses a heightened language and experiments with form, his blues still hold true to the philosophy and feel of blues. His traditional subject matter is readily apparent, even as he experiments more with the structure of his blues. His experimentation with structure at times takes him away from the blues form completely, moving him toward a jazz style of poetry. While blues is a more structured style, jazz is more formless, allowing room for spontaneity and improvisation. It is important to remember, however, that jazz, as I mentioned in my introduction, is strongly linked to the blues. While blues is primarily vocal, jazz is primarily instrumental. However, the blues is still reflected in jazz's lyrics and feel.

Although played by an ensemble, jazz remains, like blues, a very personal form. As in blues, jazz makes use of specific patterns and rhythms, but the power of jazz lies in its use of improvisation and spontaneity. Eileen Southern says of jazz, "a traditional melody or harmonic framework may serve as a takeoff point for improvisation, but it is the personality of the player and the way he improvises that produces the music" (363). Hughes is aware

of this connection between blues and jazz, and he makes it apparent in his less-structured jazz poetry. Adding through his use of rhythm and sound a musical quality to his blues poetry, Hughes uses the language of blues to vocalize the sadness which jazz expresses in its music.

One of Hughes's earliest and most popular poems, "The Weary Blues," does more than simply capture the blues feel within a jazz poem. Hughes brings the two forms together, showing the reader the bond between them, and the importance of blues to jazz. Hughes begins the poem in a strong jazz style:

Drowning a drowsy syncopated tune,
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play.
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
 To the tune o' those Weary Blues. (1-8)

Different from the short stanzas of a true blues poem, the lines in jazz style are longer and more spontaneous. Hughes captures this free feeling as the rhythm of his poem imitates the rhythm and syncopation of jazz. There is a distinct rhythm to the first two lines of "The Weary

Blues." Hughes's uses an essentially trochaic pentameter meter, creating a swift moving line. However, as jazz uses syncopation to change the rhythm of the music, Hughes modulates the meter of his poetry. Trochaic feet begin line two: "Rocking back and forth to." However, in the last two feet of the line, Hughes changes to an iambic meter, slowing the line: "a mellow croon" (2). By "syncopating" his poetry, Hughes slows the jazz tempo down, creating a mood that remains very much blues.

The language of the poem also suggests the blues philosophy and tone. Using words such as "drowning a drowsy" and "dull pallor of an old gas light," Hughes paints a blue mood as part of the setting of his poem. The words, with their drawn-out vowels, become "blue notes," using the sound of the words to create the sad tone. He describes seeing a jazz musician play, but the images Hughes creates suggest the inherent sadness of the blues. Even in his description of the piano player, there is an element of despair. Hughes says, "[The player] made that poor piano moan with melody" (10). Just as bluesmen gave human characteristics to nature and animals, here Hughes makes the piano a human character. The poor piano does not sing, it moans. There is an air of despondency about the piano itself, and after hearing the piano cry out its

despair, the narrator proclaims "O Blues!" (11). Hughes not only provides the blues mood and imagery but also has his narrator proclaim in the midst of this jazz poem that the blues are what touches him.

While the jazz form is more rhythmic than the blues form, Hughes realizes that just as blues is an important part of the mood of jazz music, blues is also integral to the mood of his jazz poem. Hughes calls on the blues lyric to strengthen the images of the musician he has created in this poem. In "The Weary Blues," Hughes does not abandon the blues form completely. When we hear the piano player sing, we realize that the jazz belongs to Hughes, while the blues belongs to the musician. Though not in the twelve-bar form, the song, at first glimpse, recalls the strong elements of the blues form. As the piano moans again, the piano player sings, "Ain't got nobody in all this world, / Ain't got nobody but ma self" (19-20). Hughes hints at the dialect of the singer, but more importantly, the singer tells of his isolation, a prominent theme of blues. He has no one in the world and reiterates this by bringing the theme to a more personal level. He is truly alone: all that he has is himself.

Hughes has not departed completely from the blues form in this poem. Instead, he introduces the form into the

jazz, breaking the flow, causing the reader to slow down and focus on the song within the poem. In the second stanza, the piano player sings more of his blues:

I got the Weary Blues
 And I can't be satisfied.
 Got the Weary Blues
 And can't be satisfied--
 I ain't happy no mo'
 And I wish that I had died. (25-30)

The song is written in Hughes's typical six-line blues form, changing the free flowing jazz style of the poem into the more structured, slower-paced style of a blues. The depth of the singer's blues is more evident as his song takes this form. Before, he was ready to put his blues behind him, but now the singer realizes that nothing can satisfy him. In the end, like so many bluesmen, he longs for death as an escape from despair.

As Hughes slides back into the jazz form of the poem, he nevertheless maintains the blue mood. Images of darkness continue as the narrator tells us that "the stars went out and so did the moon" (32). The singer has played deep into the night, and perhaps has found a release from his pain through his singing. As he falls asleep, the singer, at least temporarily, gets his wish: "He slept

like a rock or a man that's dead" (35). The poem ends on a dark yet somehow comforting note. While the singer sleeps like a man who is dead, we see the unrealized dream that he has not really died. However, there is some solace in the fact that, for the moment, he is dead. While death is, in most cases, a negative end, to the weary bluesman, there is comfort and peace in death.

Examining "The Weary Blues" is an important step in understanding the strength of the blues form. As Hughes's blues progress into jazz, much as the blues musical form did, his works still hold onto the defining elements of blues. In "Weary Blues," the merging of the two forms shows the strong bond between blues and jazz, and for the narrator, the realization that the jazz he loves is layered with the sadness and loss of the blues.

Even as his style progresses so much that it leaves the blues structure behind, Hughes never loses sight of the blues philosophy in his poetry. In his poem "Too Blue," he no longer uses the blues structure. The poem is written in a more rhythmical jazz style, using short lines to speed the pace of the poem, and Hughes no longer interjects the blues format as he does in "The Weary Blues." Even in this completely jazz poem, the spirit of the blues remains a powerful presence.

From the very beginning of the poem, the blues feel is evident. In the first stanza, although Hughes's form reflects the more rhythmic flow of jazz, each line short, jumping from one to the next, he creates a blues mood that sustains itself throughout the poem:

I got those sad old weary blues.

I don't know where to turn.

I don't know where to go.

Nobody cares about you

When you sink so low. (1-5)

The rhythm of these lines is short and sharp in contrast to the longer lines of a blues, and Hughes's line length varies. The effect is a jazz sound in which he improvises, changing the line lengths, and providing a more staccato rhythm to the lines. Although the sound Hughes creates is jazz, the mood of the poem is very much blues. The first line recalls the blues sung in "The Weary Blues" as well as the many actual blues lyrics that the earlier poem is based on. Again we see the isolation and despair not only of the bluesman but also of the twentieth-century man.

As the lines of the poem become shorter, and the pace is quickened, the blues mood deepens. In this poem, Hughes is again exploring the darkest corner of the blues. Not knowing what else to do, the narrator asks, "Shall I take a

gun / And put myself away?" (8-9). The pace is faster than that of a twelve-bar blues, yet the shortness of the lines does not detract from the blues tone of the poem. Instead, it serves only to heighten the immediacy of the question. The narrator is almost frantic in his despair.

Hughes, however, changes this tone in the next stanza. In his blues poetry, he explores both the darkest blues and the lightest. In "Too Blue," he combines the two. Immediately after the violent question of suicide is proposed, Hughes uses blues humor to lighten the mood. The narrator wonders if one bullet will be enough to kill himself and says, after considering the question, "As hard as my head is, / It would probably take two" (12-13). As we have seen before, blues has a dark humor, lightening the mood without straying far from the dark undertones of the lyric. The subject here is still suicide, but the narrator's comments are comic as well as tragic.

But as is often the case in blues, none of this matters: the blues cannot be overcome. Death is not even an escape:

But I ain't got
 Neither bullet nor gun-
 And I'm too blue
 To look for one. (14-17)

The narrator remains stuck in the rut of his despondency, having the will but not the means to escape. With nowhere to go, the narrator must continue to live with his blues.

Hughes has gone from a five-line first stanza to using four-line stanzas for the rest of the poem. Each is short, with abrupt lines giving the poem its fast jazz sound. It is in the words, however, that Hughes's dedication to the blues comes through. Although his structure has changed, reflecting the growing popularity of jazz over blues, the strength of the blues philosophy and its themes are what give the poem its power and depth. The improvisation and faster tempo of jazz reflects the tempestuous nature of the black culture it has grown out of. Hughes changes the form of his poetry from the twelve-bar blues to a less structured jazz-like form, using the violence of jazz and the black culture to shape his poetry. This is true not only in "The Weary Blues" and "Too Blue," but also in much of Hughes's jazz poetry. Just as many jazz songs contain blues in their titles, so do many of Hughes's jazz poems. Jazz musicians realized their strong grounding in the blues, and it is on this strong foundation that jazz is built. Hughes uses the same foundation in his jazz poetry, promoting, as he does in his blues poems, the place and

importance of the blues form and philosophy to the American poetic tradition.

CHAPTER 4

"FOR ME / THAT NEVER ASKT / TO BE BORN / OR DIE":

THE BLUES POETRY OF JACK KEROUAC

By the 1950s, when Beat author Jack Kerouac was writing poetry, the blues was fading, but jazz was thriving, reaching the height of its popularity. While Langston Hughes explored both traditional blues and jazz forms in his poetry, Kerouac became intoxicated with the more spontaneous nature of jazz, which he attempts to capture in his work. As jazz evolved from the blues form, so too Kerouac's poetry evolved from the blues poetic style. And while he wrote in a jazz style, Kerouac called his poems "Blues," much as many jazz tunes had the word "blues" in their titles. There is another reason, too, for calling a jazz song or poem a "blues." When lyrics are added to a jazz tune, they often reflect the blues spirit from which the jazz style evolved. As I said in the introduction, while blues is a vocal form, based in language, jazz is primarily instrumental. Kerouac tried to capture the sounds and spontaneity of jazz in his poetry.

However, in his transfer of this musical form to a vocal form, he uses the language and feel of blues to create poems that capture the mythic, poetic qualities of the blues philosophy. While writing in the spontaneous style of jazz, Kerouac still manages to emphasize the sense of personal despair and loss that is so important to blues.

In his attempt to capture the spontaneous nature of jazz, Kerouac realized the importance of blues to the style, both in meaning and form. He rarely uses the traditional blues form, but it does surface occasionally in his work. The closest Kerouac comes to the twelve-bar form is in the "36th Chorus" of "San Francisco Blues." Although he breaks the form up, emphasizing pauses and feeling much as Hughes does in altering the form, the blues style remains:

I got the San Francisco
 blues
 Bluer than misery
 I got the San Francisco blues
 Bluer than Eternity
 I gotta go on home
 Fine me
 Another
 Sanity. (2-10)

If written in the traditional three-line style, the underlying twelve-bar form of Kerouac's lines is easier to see:

I got the San Francisco blues Bluer than misery
 I got the San Francisco blues Bluer than Eternity
 I gotta go on home Fine me Another Sanity.

Much as Hughes's alteration of the form strengthens it, Kerouac's alteration heightens the emotion of the lines. The first two lines of the poem break in mid-phrase, setting aside the word "blues." After forcing the reader to focus on the word "blues," telling us that this is what the poem is really about, Kerouac breaks the line again, describing his blues: "Bluer than misery" (3).

Furthermore, Kerouac's breaking down of the last thought of this blues ("I gotta go on home / Fine me / Another / Sanity") simulates the sinking feeling the narrator experiences as his blues overtake him. He is so blue that misery does not even describe how he feels, and like many bluesmen, he longs for home where he can feel sane. As the narrator sinks into a deeper blues, the words literally sink on the page, making each line short and to the point, as the reader slows, focusing on each word.

Kerouac's inclusion of the twelve-bar blues in his jazz poetry illustrates the connection of blues to jazz and

also indicates how the form was often loosely used in jazz. This form is rarely seen in Kerouac's blues, however, as he often opts for the less structured, free style of jazz. Kerouac's free verse style of poetry experiments with language and sound, as the bebop style of jazz experimented with improvisation and rhythm. As I suggested earlier, Kerouac strives to capture the sounds of jazz. In doing so, he captures the emotion of the blues sound as well. In the "38th Chorus" of "San Francisco Blues," for example Kerouac draws on the emotional sound of blues as he writes:

That's how I
 fee--
 eel--
 That's how
 I fee--eel!
 That's *how*
 I feel--. (11-17)

Here we not only see but also feel the narrator of Kerouac's poem moaning his blues. He has just described a baby crying "In the smoke and the lamp / Of the hard ass night" (9-10). He then tells us that this is how he feels: like a crying baby in the hard night. The words on the page not only convey the narrator's feelings but also simulate the sound of the bluesman moaning his blues. We

feel his emotion because we can hear his voice crying as we read the lines. The sound of his misery is captured in the spatial arrangement of the words on the page and in the drawn-out sounds he achieves by dividing the word "feel" and adding dashes to it. In effect, the visual becomes the aural. As well as capturing the bluesman's moan, Kerouac's form here captures also the music of jazz. One can hear the sound of a saxophone being played, the musician stretching notes and playing them harder, as Kerouac stretches words and places special emphasis on them through the use of punctuation and italics.

A poem like the "38th Chorus" exemplifies Kerouac's use of form to capture the sound and emotion of blues, and one like the "36th Chorus" shows his understanding of the traditional twelve-bar blues style. But it is when he leaves the form behind that Kerouac truly begins to express blues philosophy in his poetry. If we look at the "10th Chorus" of "San Francisco Blues," for instance, we see the emergence of many of the themes that give blues its depth and powerful sense of emotion. Kerouac begins:

Dig the sad old bum

No money

Presuming to hit the store

And buy his cube of oleo

For 8 cents

So in cheap rooms

At A M 3 30

He can cough & groan. (1-8)

In the first half of the poem, Kerouac introduces several blues themes, all of which embody the suffering and loss that are a part of the bluesman's life and myth. The narrator is observing the homeless bum, who has no money, no job, and no home. Kerouac sets "No Money" further in on the page than the first line, emphasizing the bum's poverty by making it stick out visually. Imagining the bum's restless life, the narrator sees sleepless nights and failing health. These sleepless nights are reflected in Kerouac's form, the shorter lines (5-8), using mostly one-syllable words, which speed the rhythm of each line. The words seem to toss and turn on the page as the restless bum coughs and groans late at night in a "cheap room" (6). As the narrator continues to tell of the loss and "nightmares" the bum will no doubt experience, his personal blues begin to show themselves. He identifies with the bum, making a connection as he considers the future: "His death no blackern / Mine" (17-18). As in many blues, the narrator here sees death and accepts it, realizing that he is just as low down as the restless bum. Like Hughes, Kerouac uses

the dark humor of blues to juxtapose the grave image of this black death, ending the poem with an analogy: "his Toast's / Just as well buttered / And on the one side" (18-20). Again identifying with the bum, in line eighteen ("Mine, his Toast's"), Kerouac places the narrator's and the bum's lives side by side on the page. The narrator completes their bond, comparing both their lives to a piece of toast. They are both "just as well buttered," given the same chance in life, and in the end they will suffer the same meaningless fate. Kerouac's blues reflect a prominent theme of twentieth-century American mass society--the insignificance of an individual life, which is also reflected in the deep pain and suffering of blues lyrics.

Just as his narrator identifies with the bum in the poem, Kerouac identifies with the jazz musicians and the blues. Blues and jazz, however, have grown out of the African American tradition of poetry and music. Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, as African American writers, have a natural connection to blues and its poetic tradition through their culture. How then does Kerouac find his way successfully into that tradition? Brown and Hughes wrote about the oppression, violence, and loss of African Americans, and African American life is certainly the subject of the early blues. Kerouac identified with the

personal and social struggles of African Americans. Much as Brown and Hughes gave their people a voice through their blues, Kerouac gave his generation a voice through his.

In his essay, "Beatific: The Origin's of the Beat Generation," Kerouac defines what he meant in using the term "beat generation." He says, "The word 'beat' originally meant poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways" (570). Kerouac found the same emotions and experiences he was feeling reflected in the music of the jazz musicians. The blues they sang reflect the restless, beaten down nature of the beat generation of which Kerouac saw himself a part. James T. Jones says of Kerouac,

Being down-and-out did not, of course, make him black[...]but it did put him in a position analogous to that of the bop musician, a position in the world that allowed him to empathize with the frustration, anguish, and indomitability that brought the great blues voices into being. (80)

What Jones points out is that while blues grew out of the suffering of the African American culture, the blues are not bound by race but brought on by human suffering. Kerouac's life reflects the anguish of the blues, from his hitchhiking and wandering from job to job to his later life

of near poverty and alcoholic death. It is no wonder then that when he turned from writing novels to poetry, Kerouac chose to write blues.

Kerouac's blues, although different in form, are as vivid, deep, and emotionally intense as those of Brown, Hughes, or the bluesmen who started the tradition. One of Kerouac's most powerful blues is "On Tears" from "Richmond Hill Blues." He begins by setting a scene straight out of blues folklore:

Tears is the break of my brow,

The moony tempestuous

sitting down

In dark railyards. (1-4)

The depth of the narrator's sorrow is evident in the first line, suggesting that the hard expression of his face is both representative of his sorrow and worthy of evoking tears in those who see him. The simple act of sitting down, both "moony" and "tempestuous," evokes the sorrowful violence of nature that is at the heart of many blues, and shows the forceful emotion of the act itself. Using a railyard as the location for his poem, Kerouac expresses two important blues themes, restlessness and a need to escape. The narrator has probably been hopping trains, or

is about to do so, in order to escape the blues that are haunting him.

As the poem progresses, the narrator has a "waking vision" of his mother, which leads to another blues theme prominent in this poem. While sunken down in the train yards, seeing this vision, the narrator says, "I wept to understand / The trap mortality" (7-8). In his mother's face, he sees his own mortality, crying as he understands the nature of this vision, the knowledge that his life will end. Death is always nearby in the blues, as it is here for this particular narrator. And it is not the first time the narrator has seen death. He then cries, "Father father / Why hast though forsaken me?" (11-12). If we presume this narrator to be Kerouac himself (his works are often read autobiographically), these lines take on multiple meanings. Kerouac's father died a slow painful death when Kerouac was only twenty-two (Nicosia 21). On a personal level, he is asking why his own father has left him alone in this hard world. Kerouac also uses the words of Christ dying on the cross, calling out to God whom he believes has turned his back on him. The lines also recall the bluesman pleading with the heavens but knowing that there is no use in doing so. The three views of these lines not only serve

to bring up death again but also to suggest abandonment and isolation.

As Kerouac's blues comes to a close, the narrator's sorrow and awareness of death are again asserted. As he makes a final plea for salvation, we are made aware of the hopelessness of his situation:

Mortality & unpleasure
 Roam this city--
 Unhappiness my middle name
 I want to be saved--
 Sunk--can't be
 Won't be
 Never was made to--
 So retch! (13-20)

An awareness of death and sorrow roam the city, as the bluesman roams the country. For this narrator, however, there is no escape from his blues; they are part of him, so much so that he makes unhappiness part of his name, the only part we see. At this point, the narrator's thoughts begin to trail off, leaving only fragments as his sorrow overtakes him. The dashes and line breaks work to emphasize the narrator's mind, jumping from thought to thought. His desire ("I want to be saved--") is cut off by his reality ("Sunk--can't be") (16-17). The narrator longs

for salvation, but he feels he has sunk so low that he cannot and will not be saved. Unlike Christ, who was sent to die, was abandoned, then raised from the dead, the narrator was never meant to be saved. Not finding the connection he needs to Christ, realizing he will die alone, without salvation, and that he cannot escape, his final thought is what a wretched creature he has become. The word "wretched" becomes shortened as "retch," capturing both the immediacy of his condition, as well as the nausea that might accompany such a hopeless realization.

Not all of Kerouac's blues hit the low he sinks to in "On Tears." Like Hughes, Kerouac explores a lighter side of the blues and suggests that one can use humor to help displace one's blues. Like Hughes's narrator who argues with a spider, in the "12th Chorus" of "Desolation Blues," Kerouac's blues take a lighter tone as he questions the existence of a flower. He begins:

Little weird flower,
 why did you grow?
 Who planted you
 on this god damned hill? (1-4)

"Desolation Blues" is a poem written while Kerouac lived alone atop Desolation Peak. With no one to talk to on the mountain, rather than talking to himself, the narrator has

a discussion with a flower. The flower quickly becomes a metaphor for life as the narrator asks it why it grew and who planted it. The narrator is asking himself, in effect: Why are we here? Is there a God? Although the conversation remains mostly lighthearted, the blues feel is apparent in phrases such as "this god damned hill," which pop in between the more pleasant flower images. The hill image takes the narrator's question a step further: Why was I put on this damned earth?

The humorous conversation continues as the narrator comments on the perfect nature of the flower, its beauty, and the "whole family" that surrounds it. This part of the poem captures not only the physical nature of the flower but also the joy and beauty of life itself. These images are quickly broken though as the flowers become no longer a metaphor for life, but simply flowers again. The narrator continues speaking:

I thot last week
you were funeral bouquets
for me
that never askt
to be born
or die. (21-26)

Death is the primary blues theme in Kerouac's blues, and he again turns to it, even in this lighter poem. The flowers are no longer symbols of life, but a bouquet brought to someone's grave, here the narrator's. There is some ambiguity in the last three lines of the passage just quoted. They reflect the opening question: Why did the flowers grow? At first it seems as though the flowers never asked to be born. But just as the narrator questions his own existence at the beginning of the poem, he seems to say in these lines: I never meant to be born or die. He is not sure why he was born, why he was put "on this damned hill," but refuses to take responsibility for his presence here, or even for the questions he has posed. Instead he dismisses them, saying, "But now I guess / I'm just talkin / thru my / empty head (27-30). He ignores his loneliness and sorrow, blaming these thoughts on his wandering mind. Looking back at the lines of the poem, scattered across the page, they wander about the page, much as the narrator's thoughts are scattered throughout his "empty head" (30). This selection from "Desolation Blues" becomes another example of the poetic tradition of blues. While using the dark humor of the blues, Kerouac has explored the lonely question of one's existence and the meaning of one's life.

He also captures the creativity and intensity behind the metaphors and imagery often used in blues.

In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed the importance of myth to blues, and, more importantly for Kerouac, how the bluesmen often created their own myths. Whether by raising themselves to mythic stature as Robert Johnson did, or creating the mythic badmen, bluesmen make the creation of myth central to their poetics. Kerouac creates both types of mythic figures in his blues. Through his novels and poetry, the character of Jack Kerouac has taken a mythic status in American culture. However, this mythic sense applies not only to Kerouac himself, but to the people around him. In his poetry, Kerouac's sense of myth clearly grows out of the blues tradition. As Jones says:

His mythic view of his family resembles that taken by progressive African Americans: a period of incredible pain in the not too distant past had been preceded by a time of freedom, rich culture, and relatively exalted status. (80)

Kerouac's mythic portrayal of his family appears especially in his longest poem, Mexico City Blues. From the "90th Chorus" to the "103rd Chorus," Kerouac discusses his brother, sister, mother, and father.

In the poems about his father, Kerouac describes a youthful, loving man with high hopes for the future. By the "103rd Chorus," however, Kerouac's father has become a memory, a shadow, a myth. He writes:

My father in downtown red
 Walked around like a shadow
 Of ink black, with hat, nodding,
 In the immortal lights of my dreams. (1-4)

Here Kerouac's father has become "immortal," living on only in his dreams. He is a ghost whose memory will haunt Kerouac. Next we see another dreamt image of the father. In this vision, however, the image gains greater mythic significance. We learn that the father "Is the image of Ignorant Man / Hurrying to his destiny which is Death / Even though he knows it" (9-11). The father becomes a mythical everyman, knowing he must die, and facing his death headstrong. In the song that ends the first stanza, Kerouac proclaims the heroic status of the father again: "'S why they call Cheer / a bottle, a glass, a beer, / A *Cup of Courage*--" (12-14). These dreamt memories of Kerouac's father end in a toast to a mythic hero, a figure ready to face death stoically with courage becoming of a hero.

Kerouac's suffering is so profound, however, that he breaks from blues tradition to gain access to a deeper level of blues. While the bluesmen built their myths and left them intact, Kerouac does something quite different. In previous choruses, Kerouac builds up the myth of the happy, loving father who becomes the mythic hero in the first stanza of the "103rd Chorus." The second stanza, however, turns in another direction. It begins by looking at the futility of life. Kerouac discusses how businessmen and laborers die "The same loathsome stale death" (18). The hero-father seems aware of this, and is willing to face what lies ahead. By the end of the poem, however, Kerouac breaks down the myth he has built. In a final memory, he says:

My remembrance of my father
 in downtown Lowell
 walking like cardboard cut
 across the lost lights
 is the same empty material
 as my father in the grave. (21-26)

The myth of the father breaks down, taking Kerouac's blues to a new low. While previously mourning the loss of his father, Kerouac now sees him as a cardboard cutout, like everyone else. In the end, no amount of courage matters,

because everyone dies. Nothing, not even life, has a meaning, and Kerouac's nihilistic despair is in knowing this, knowing that we are the same out of the grave as we are in it. Life is death.

While the myth crumbles as thoughts of his father turn to thoughts of death, Kerouac does not always deconstruct the myths he creates. In a fairly positive ending to Mexico City Blues, he constructs another strong mythical figure. Many mythic bluesmen are on some sort of quest, whether it be for forgiveness, love, or a way out of the blues. Kerouac is no different. Mexico City Blues becomes his quest for spiritual enlightenment, which he finds at the end in the musician Charlie Parker. The three choruses about Parker not only pay tribute to him but also immortalize him as one of blues' badmen. One of the "good" badmen, such as John Henry, Parker becomes for Kerouac the Buddha he has been searching for, as well as his musical mentor. Aaron Jentzen notes, "Kerouac acknowledges his debt to Parker's innovations, asks Parker's forgiveness for his failings as a jazz poet, and captures the spirit of bop itself in the poem" (6). Parker becomes not God, but a hero to whom Kerouac can look as a model of the honesty he seeks in his own writing.

In the "240th Chorus," Kerouac describes the deceased Parker, giving him heroic status. Not only does he say that Parker was "Musically as important as Beethoven," but he also goes on to describe Parker and his music (1).

Kerouac praises Parker, saying that he stood

Proud and calm, like a leader

of music

In the Great Historic World Night,

And wailed his little saxophone,

The alto, with piercing clear

lament

In perfect tune & shining harmony. (6-12)

These lines differ from the short line length we have seen so far in many of Kerouac's poems. The length and meter of these lines slows the reader down, creating a sense of reverence through which Parker should be viewed. Parker becomes a leader not just of musicians but of all people in the "Great Historic World." His instrument becomes his sword, piercing with a deep, sorrowful emotion. And Parker is perfect, almost immortal in his art. As the ballad to Parker progresses, listeners are rallied around their leader as he is "Whistling them on to the brink of eternity" (18). Again, Kerouac sees his own death, and that of humanity, but unlike the memory of his father, the

heroic image of Parker holds strong. Even though humanity will "plop in the waters of / slaughter / And white meat, and die / One after another, in time," Kerouac seems no longer overwhelmed by the futility of life (22-25). He has found in Parker the hero he was looking for in his father, a Buddha he addresses in the next chorus:

Charley Parker, pray for me--

Pray for me and everybody

In the Nirvanas of your brain

Where you hide, indulgent and huge. (15-18)

Kerouac has created a spiritual hero out of this musician, a mythic hero, forever immortalized in the blues tradition.

Kerouac's blues poetry represents the progression of the blues style as it begins to evolve into jazz. It is only natural that he would write in the jazz style, a style that captures the philosophy and feel of blues, but is more spontaneous in rhythm and less structured in form. At the time he was writing his poems, jazz was at the height of its popularity and provided Kerouac with a mode of expression well suited for his spontaneous life and for the emotions and oppressions he faced as a member of the beat generation. Inspired by jazz, Kerouac wrote in a manner that, like the musicians, tried to capture the spirit and mood of the moment. The way his words spill and spread

across the page, sometimes breaking apart themselves, captures both the spirit and the sound of jazz music. The emotion stirred within him, however, was brought out by the blues influence on jazz. Blues themes permeate his poetry, especially the awareness of mortality. The power of the blues theme and its poetic tradition allowed Kerouac to reach a deeper level of pain and suffering. In his search for salvation and meaning, Kerouac found blues and mastered the art. Like the poetry of Brown and Hughes, Kerouac's poetry is a testament to the strength and tradition of the blues lyric.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Blues is a uniquely American form of music. Having grown out of the oppressive nature of the African American culture, blues is a form that has given us not only a medium but also a language for pain and suffering. Steeped in tradition, blues is not simply a type of music, but, as I have tried to suggest in this thesis, a strong form of early African American poetry.

Even as the blues form has evolved over time into jazz, the power and emotion of the blues lyric has not been lost. These lyrics are indeed a form of poetry, one whose tradition has endured in the numerous forms blues have taken. Blues and jazz performers alike realize the strength behind the blues philosophy, and have used the poetry of the blues to instill a sense of sorrow and loss in their music.

Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Jack Kerouac all recognized the poetic nature of the blues lyric, each adopting the form as his own. While Brown strove to

capture the tradition and language of the blues lyric in his poetry, Hughes refined the form, exploring not only its wide range of emotion but also its relationship to jazz. Kerouac took Hughes's interest in jazz a step further, embracing its spontaneous nature while attempting to capture the sound and feel of jazz with language. In doing so, Kerouac used the poetry of the blues lyric to express his personal despair in his jazz poetry. While all three of these poets master the art of the blues in different ways, their work has become a testament to the importance of the blues lyric. And although debate persists about whether or not blues lyrics should be considered poetry, the works of Brown, Hughes, and Kerouac give weight to the argument of those who do see blues as a form of poetry. These poets realized the value of blues form and language, and their use of blues strengthens the case for "blues poetry."

As the debate goes on, the music continues to evolve. Experiencing a resurgence in popularity over the last few years, blues has become more "rock" based, and the poetic nature of the lyrics has begun to fade. Fewer musicians today are using the traditional twelve-bar form for their blues, and while some modern bluesmen, like Ian Moore in his song "Muddy Jesus," still use religion and folklore to

create their own myths, the art of blues has become less a form of poetry and more a form of storytelling. The stories bluesmen tell are still powerful and steeped in the blues philosophy; however, the form and poetry of the early blues has been lost in the process.

Although blues was once a form entirely based in black expression, many of the new bluesmen are white teenagers. Like Kerouac in the 1950s, young Anglo Americans today are experiencing the deep emotions inherent in blues, and are identifying with the culture from which it came. As music evolves, so does culture, and the need for new forms of expression arises. Much as blues did in the early twentieth century, rap has become a popular form of African American expression. Like early blues, rap is often a poetry of protest against pain, loss, violence, and oppression. And as with blues, this once primarily African American form has been adapted and adopted by other groups who identify with the culture's suffering. No longer limited to black performers such as Run DMC and Dr. Dre, rap is now written and performed by both Hispanic groups such as Cypress Hill as well as by white performers such as EMENIM. While I am by no means an authority on this form, it seems, like blues, to have poetic qualities. As a modern extension of the African American oral tradition,

rap has begun to transcend race as other groups identify with its themes and its forms of expression. But, while the future of rap remains to be seen, blues is no longer only the poetry of African American suffering, but as Brown, Hughes, and Kerouac demonstrate, a poetry of human suffering.

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