

“Double Consciousness” and the Poetry of Langston Hughes on the example of The Weary Blues (1923)

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Abstract

1920s of American history have been known and called as the Jazz Age. This Age is featured by flourishing of culture, in particular, the culture having originated from Afro-American roots. One of the parts of this culture is the development of Afro-American literature, especially, poetry, which was labeled by critics as “Harlem Renaissance”. Harlem Renaissance is characterized by dualism peculiar for the culture of the colored people: so-called “double-consciousness”, expressed in a psychological dilemma: should an Afro-American artist remain bound to its African roots, or is cultural assimilation in Euro-American direction inevitable for him or her.

Langston Hughes, one of the central figures of Harlem Renaissance, tries to remain faithful to Afro-American roots in his creations. His poem The Weary Blues is the best example of that. The author of the article places a question: was Langston Hughes able to overcome the “double consciousness” and take pot luck with African origins and roots, or did he also not manage to escape from the assimilation in the melting-pot of American culture? And he provides the answer: the poet succeeds in promoting the folk (Black) tradition, having to compromise with the inevitable framing into American (White) reality of both the form and the content.

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Being an author writing essays, short stories, and novels, Langston Hughes is primarily associated with the revival of the poetry of Black Americans in the 1920s, the period labeled as Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance was the climax of the uprising of the Black culture starting from the end of XIX century, which expressed itself in theater, arts, music, and literature. This climax coincided with another very important phenomenon associated with Afro-American musical folklore – the so-called Jazz Age, the period between 1919, the end of the WWI, and 1929, when the Great Depression started. The word “coincided” might sound here inappropriate insofar as these two cultural explosions – Harlem Renaissance and Jazz Age – are, in fact, two sides of one coin – Afro-American cultural revival, and their coincidence has in reality a dialectical interdependence.

As Nash points out in his essay *Harlem Renaissance*, this revival was featured by contraposition of two trends characteristic for the Negro tradition: on the one hand, the one orientated on national folklore, which for some reasons used as its sources the culture of jazz and blues; on the other hand, the poetry having as its basis the high art taking its roots in European literature. These two trends composed the creative duality of Harlem Renaissance. The nature of this duality was not new by itself. By that time it had already been analyzed by a prominent scholar, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois in his article of the 1897 *Strivings of the Negro People*. In this work, Du Bois explained:

*The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to **merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost** (bold script is mine – G. Sh.). He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa; he does not wish to bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he believes that Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of self-development.*

(*Gates, Jr., and McKay, p.615*)

Du Bois introduced the term “double consciousness” to denote the internal spiritual conflict of being African and, at the same time, American, taking place in the black soul. Du Bois was concerned with sociological aspects of the dual perception of the mind of Negroes. His theory should be confirmed some twenty years after under different circumstances. The expressions of his theory ought to be also cultural ones – the controversies of Harlem Renaissance.

Langston Hughes claimed himself to be a proponent of African side of Harlem Renaissance Debate, which is evident in his programmatic essay of 1926 *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. This essay appeared in the middle of the Roaring Twenties – the period labeled also Jazz Age – the decade, when the new popular culture associated with musical genres of jazz and blues created by African Americans became the common source of entertainment both for the Blacks and Whites. As Hughes wrote in his memoirs, in his leisure time he sat in the clubs and listened to blues, jazz and wrote poetry. As a result, very original poetry was born, the most famous example of which is *The Weary Blues* (1923). **As Hughes admitted by himself**, he tried to put the songs sung in jazz bars into poetry. We shall try to analyze *The Weary Blues* to ground whether Hughes's primary affiliation was that to his African roots and to find out whether Hughes still could not manage to overcome the Americanization of his style.

As Fleischman and Jones summarize, “The speaker of Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* describes an evening of listening to a blues musician in Harlem. With its diction, its repetition of lines and its inclusion of blues lyrics, the poem evokes the mournful tone and tempo of blues music and gives readers an appreciation of the state of mind of the blues musician in the poem” (Fleishman and Jones, online). The poem itself uses several kinds of rhythmical forms. As Gwynn notes, in the first part of the poem, describing the musician and his setting – Lenox Avenue as a famous street in Harlem – Hughes uses mostly the rhyming having four-beat in a line in couplets, or pairs (Gwynn, online). This is the rhyme widely accepted in European poetry:

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*Droning 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.*

(Here and from now on, unless otherwise indicated, the quotations are taken from Rampersad and Roessel, 1995, p. 50)

Gwynn states that “Today, this basic rhythmical structure has penetrated even to such “non-European” forms of art as rap and hip-hop. But the actual “blues” in the *Weary Blues* occurs only at the end of the poem:

*"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."*

Hughes has adapted here the three line structure, what's called “the twelve bar blues”. Some speculate that he broke each line in half – for a six line stanza, because that format opened up the lyrics for reading on the page” (Gwynn, online). In the pure blues, however, there would have only been three lines:

*I got the Weary Blues, and I can't be satisfied
Got the Weary Blues, and I can't be satisfied –*

I ain't happy no mo' and I wished that I had died

This poetical form is quite different from conventional European forms of poetry. As an independent lyrical phenomenon the blues originated at the end of XIX century, (some say, even earlier – during the Reconstruction – Tracy, 1988), and is featured by this distinctive three-line twelve-bar structure. No European poet had ever written using this form. Just like Japanese Haiku is a product of Japanese culture, this little section of the poem represents the example of peculiarly African folklore born on American soil. (A typical 12-bar blues stanza consists of three lines, from which the first two are identical (or slightly different), and the third line explains the meaning of the first two. The content of a stanza is usually about the miserable situation of a speaker, his problems, such as lost love or life hardships.) This stanza represents the climax of Hughes's *The Weary Blues*. By climaxing the poem in such a way, Hughes underlines his African roots, and enhances his faithfulness to African American tradition as defined above. The blues is a symbol of sadness, despair, discouragement. Although born after slavery, it is rooted in field hollers and work songs of southern plantations, where Negroes could not express their sorrow otherwise than pinching the strings of self-made guitars. The words of the title of the poem – the weary blues – could be interpreted as *tired, exhausted blues*, and, taking into account the black roots, the more appropriate epithets would sound like *fagged, whacked*, or even *dog-tired*. At least, this blues speaks about the condition of being jaded and worn out. However, it is a question whether here physical weariness or mental one, better say – spiritual – is meant. Analyzing the words that follow, we are made sure about the second supposition. It occurs, first of all, through the phrase “...and I can't be satisfied...”: a worker on a cotton plantation would hardly sing about satisfaction – this is the concept already belonging to a relatively freer and rather “better-off” individual. There is definitely a large gap between “satisfaction” and “survival”. This already places the speaker in a relatively different setting. Another paradoxical phrase in the stanza is “...I ain't happy no more...”, meaning, supposedly, that the singer used to be happy. Such words and ideas can widely be found in the texts of white singers, who often sing of lost love, and not on hard living conditions. Thus, although the form of this stanza is peculiarly African, the content is

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“Americanized”. In another stanza, Hughes enters the realm of blues again. However, here he completely abandons the 12-bar pattern, and shifts to other structure:

*In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan –
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."*

This is the blues too, but not twelve-, rather eight or sixteen-bar one. This can be seen as retracing to less African-influenced structure, which could be found more in the music of Tin-Pan-Alley, than jukeboxes of Saint Louis or Memphis. Besides, the mood and tone of this stanza is more optimistic, which occurs less often in blues lyrics.

As we can see, the poem abounds with colloquialisms used mainly by Black Americans. As Gwynn asserts, “Hughes was a populist poet, who deeply revered the folk traditions of African-American life. But he was also a modernist poet, who favored innovation and experimentation. **Surely, his greatest innovation was turning one of the basic forms of lyrical expression of his people** [*blues – G. Sh.*] **into a serious literary form**”. The same is asserted by Tracy (1988). This statement is just not only for Langston Hughes, but other poets of Jazz Age Harlem Renaissance as well. Literally, they did what jazz musicians were doing in music: converting the basic folklore form (blues) into a serious musical form (jazz).

And here we come to the point of our concern: was it possible for Hughes to escape from the suffocating Euro-American influence and remain in the domain of African culture, or was it not possible for him to preserve the purity of the blues and have to write in a conventional American style? We can recall a famous adept of the second statement, another Harlem Renaissance landmark – Countee Cullen. As Nash states, “by contrast to Hughes, Cullen pointedly ignores the “low-down folks” and

their art forms. Being the poet, whom Hughes chides for his aspirations to be “*poet and not Negro poet*”, Cullen adheres exclusively to European forms in his work, with no infusion of the music or vernacular speech of his community” (Nash, online). In the first stanza of his poem *Heritage*, which David K. Kirby calls “The Question”, Cullen asks:

*One three centuries removed
From the scenes his father loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?
(Gates, Jr., and McKay, 1997, p. 1311)*

In contrast to Hughes's work, one finds nothing celebratory here in the speaker's acknowledgement of his black identity. Quoting Nash, “Whereas for Hughes's poetic personae blackness is a source of inspiration and strength, for Cullen's it impedes his achieving his greatest personal aspiration” (Nash, online).

So, what about the hero of Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues*? Does he wish to Africanize America? Or, maybe, does he wish to dissolve his Negro blood in a stream of white America, saying “no” to Negro contributions to culture? Or, finally, does he, according to Du Bois, wish to “merge his double self into a better and truer self, wishing in this merging neither of the older selves to be lost”?

Jazz Age, the jazz music of the 20s is featured exactly by this double consciousness, the most vividly expressed in two approaches of jazz piano of the 20s: on the one hand, the school of blues – based on a single theme performed in twelve bars and limited number of keys (two or three) usually by half-amateur pianists, confined to their African roots; on the other hand, the school of ragtime/stride – great variety of themes with different sets of bars performed often by highly skillful players usually having good background of European classical musical education (Collier, 1979). In the 12th and 13th lines of *The Weary Blues* we read:

*Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool*

The words *sad* and *raggy* are used here in a pretty interesting way. Usually the blues are sad indeed, *blue* as fans call them, and often smooth. However, the soloist could *rag* the tune, and here not only a syncopation is meant, but also performing the blues as a ragtime player would do it. Here Hughes may hint that his black musician possessed the skills and technique peculiar for white pianists.

Let us return again to the first lines of the poem:

*Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.*

And in the lines 17-18 we read:

*In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan –*

Crooned can be the blues, of course. It can be crooned by Nat King Cole, for example, whereas his successor, but not fully a follower, Ray Charles, avoided the crooning of the real blues. Both had fantastic success at a white listener, both being the great performers of the blues proper, both approaching the blues from different sides though. Nat was crooning it, Ray was moaning (listen to *Makin' Whoopee* by both of them, for example). As for Langston Hughes, he uses the words “croon” and “moan” interchangeably, obviously aware that with regard to the blues they sound as antitheses. The two above-mentioned performers do not formally belong to the generation of the Jazz Age, but their styles reincarnated the genre of the blues in the decades to be followed.

Being put before the dilemma of double consciousness, running

through both Harlem Renaissance and Jazz Age, Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* is an attempt to preserve the principles of the Black side in this debate with finding the compromise with – but not the submission to – the White side. The speaker of the poem wishes to remain Negro, to remain African, to remain Black and Blue, being acceptable to White America, though. And in *The Weary Blues* Hughes succeeds. He manages to, first, insert, and, then, envelop the marvel of Negro lore – the blues – into American (i.e. European) literary form successfully combining both of these with the emphasis on the former. *The Weary Blues* is the manifesto of African consciousness of Harlem Renaissance with the simultaneous acceptance of Euro-American tradition.

*And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.*

This is the final stanza of the poem, where the condition of the weary bluesman is described in a **non**-twelve-bar-blues way. As we have already said, the traditional blues is generally not crooned, it is sung from the soul. Crooned usually are sweet romance melodies revered by white audience. By this the last lines hint that, despite his roots, the player remains in a setting where he should adjust, accommodate, adapt. He should *croon*, not *moan*, so that the audience is pleased. Maybe that is what makes him *weary*, maybe that is why he *cannot be satisfied*, maybe that is why he *ain't happy no mo' and he wished that he had died*. He cannot totally stick to his oversee roots, he should become Americanized, regardless of his background, inclination, or taste. It proves to be really hard to avoid American melting pot.

And that is the dilemma of Harlem Renaissance in Jazz Age.

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