

The Harlem Renaissance (1919-1929)

What was the Harlem Renaissance?

What?

Who?

Songs Called the Blues

Langston Hughes

"The Blues! Songs folks made up when their heart hurts, that's what the Blues are. Sad funny songs – too sad to be funny and too funny to be sad." Thus one of the characters in the Negro play, *DON'T YOU WANT TO BE FREE?*, at the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, defines the Blues.

Then he goes on to say that, "Colored folks made up the Blues. Now, everybody sings 'em out of being poor and lonely, and homes busted up, and desperate, and broke." For the Blues are genuine folk-songs born out of heartache. They are sounds of the black South, particularly the city South. Sounds of the poor streets and back alleys of Memphis and Birmingham, Atlanta and Galveston, out of black and beaten, but unbeatable thoughts, from the strings of pawn-shop guitars, and the chords of pianos with no ivory keys.

The Blues and Spirituals are two great Negro gifts to American music. The spirituals are religious songs, born in camp meetings and remote plantation district. But the Blues are city songs rising from the crowded streets of big towns, or beating against lonely walls of hall bed-rooms where you can't sleep at night. The Spirituals are escape songs, looking toward heaven, tomorrow, and God. But the Blues are *today* songs, here and now, broke and broken-hearted, when you're troubled in mind and don't know what to do, and nobody cares.

There are many kinds of Blues. There are the family Blues, when a man and woman have quarreled, and the quarrel can't be patched up. There's the loveless Blues, when you haven't even got anybody to quarrel with. And there's the left-lonesome Blues, when the one you care for's gone away. Then there's also the broke-and-hungry Blues, a stranger in a strange town. And the desperate going-to-the-river Blues that says:

I'm goin' down to de river
And take ma rockin' chair –
If the Blues overcome me,
I'm gonna rock on away from here!

But it's not always as bad as that, because there's another verse that declares:

Goin' down to de railroad,
Lay my head on de track,
I'm going' to de railroad,
Lay my head on de track –
But if I see de train a-comin'
I'm gonna jerk it back!

For sad as Blues may be, there's almost always something humorous about them – even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying. You know

I went to de gypsy's
To get ma fortune told.
Went to de gypsy's
To get ma fortune told,

But the gypsy said, dog-gone your
Un-hard-lucky soul!

In America, during the last quarter of a century, there have been many great singers of the Blues, but the finest of all were the three famous Smiths – no relation, one to another – Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, and the astounding Bessie Smith. Clara and Bessie are both dead now, and Mamie no longer sings, but thousands of Blues collectors in the United States and abroad prize their records. Today a girl named Georgia White carries on the old tradition of the Blues in the folk manner. And Mindge Williams, of the Louis Armstrong band, sings them in a more polished, but effective way. Of the men, Lonnie Johnson is perhaps the finest living male singer of the Blues, although there's a portly fellow named Jimmy Rushing in Count Bassie's orchestra who is a runner-up. And Lead Belly also is to be considered.

The most famous Blues, of course, is the *St. Louis Blues*, that Mr. W.C. Handy wrote down one night on the corner of a bar on a levee street in St. Louis, and which has since gone all over the world. The *St. Louis Blues* is sung more than any other song on the air, is known in Shanghai and Buenos Aires, Paris and Berlin – in fact, is heard so often in Europe that a great many Europeans believe it to be the American National Anthem.

Less popular, but equally beautiful are the Blues, *Trouble in Mind*, *Memphis Blues*, *Yellow Dog Blues*, and the never to be surpassed *Gulf Coast Blues* which begins with one of the loneliest lines in all the realm of song:

The mail man passed but
He didn't leave me no news . . .

Blues are still being made. One of the newest authentic Blues to come up out of the South, by way of the colored boys in the government work camps, is the *Dupree Blues*, that sad story of a man who wanted to give his girl a diamond ring, but had none to give her, so he took his gun and went to the jewelry store where, instead of getting the diamond ring, he got the jewelry man, jail, and the noose.

The real Negro Blues are as fine as any folk music we have, and I'm hoping the day will come when Marion Anderson and Paul Robeson, famous concert singers, will include a group of Blues on their programs as well as the Spiritual which they now sing so effectively.

A young dancer in New York, Felicia Sorel, is already using the Blues as a background for the creation of new dance forms. I see no reason why great dances could not be born of the Blues, great American dances containing all the laughter and pain, hunger and heartache, search and reality of the contemporary scene – for the Blues have something that goes beyond race or sectional limits, that appeals to the ear and heart of people everywhere – otherwise, how could it be that in a Tokyo restaurant one night I heard a Louis Armstrong record of the *St. Louis Blues* played over and over for a crowd of Japanese diners there? You don't have to understand the words to know the meaning of the Blues, or to feel their sadness, or to hope their hopes:

Troubled in mind, I'm blue,
But I won't be blue always:
The suns' gonna shine
In my back door someday.

And for that sunshine, everybody waits.

Songs Called the Blues Analysis

Listen and discuss the following two blues songs.

I'd Rather Go Blind

Etta James

Something told me it was over

When I saw you and her talking

Something deep down in my soul, soul cried, girl

When I saw you and that girl walking by

Ooh, I would rather, I would rather go blind, boy

Than to see you walk away from me, child, no

Ooh, so you see I love you so much

But I don't want to watch you leave me, babe

Most of all, I just don't, I just don't want to be free, no

Ooh, ooh, I was just, I was just, I was just sitting here thinking

Of your kiss and your warm embrace, yeah

When the reflection in the glass that I held to my lips now, babe

Revealed the tears that was on my face, yeah, ooh

And baby, baby, I'd rather be blind, boy

Than to see you walk away, see you walk away from me, yeah, ooh

Baby, baby, baby, I'd rather be blind now

The Thrill is Gone

BB King

The thrill is gone
The thrill is gone away
The thrill is gone baby
The thrill is gone away
You know you done me wrong baby
And you'll be sorry someday

The thrill is gone
It's gone away from me
The thrill is gone baby
The thrill is gone away from me
Although I'll still live on
But so lonely I'll be

The thrill is gone
It's gone away for good
Oh, the thrill is gone baby
Baby its gone away for good
Someday I know I'll be over it all baby
Just like I know a man should

You know I'm free, free now baby
I'm free from your spell
I'm free, free now
I'm free from your spell
And now that it's over
All I can do is wish you well

Someone Like You

Adele

I heard that you're settled down,
That you found a girl and you're married now,
I heard that your dreams came true,
Guess she gave you things I didn't give to you,
Old friend, why are you so shy?
Ain't like you to hold back or hide from the light,

I hate to turn up out of the blue uninvited,
But I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it,
I had hoped you'd see my face,
And that you'd be reminded that for me it isn't over,

Nevermind, I'll find someone like you,
I wish nothing but the best for you, too,
Don't forget me, I beg,
I remember you said,
"Sometimes it lasts in love,
But sometimes it hurts instead,"
Sometimes it lasts in love,
But sometimes it hurts instead, yeah,

You know how the time flies,
Only yesterday was the time of our lives,
We were born and raised in a summer haze,
Bound by the surprise of our glory days,

I hate to turn up out of the blue uninvited,
But I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it,
I had hoped you'd see my face,
And that you'd be reminded that for me it isn't over,

Nevermind, I'll find someone like you,
I wish nothing but the best for you, too,
Don't forget me, I beg,
I remember you said,
"Sometimes it lasts in love,
But sometimes it hurts instead,"

Nothing compares,
No worries or cares,
Regrets and mistakes, they're memories made,
Who would have known how bittersweet this would taste?

Nevermind, I'll find someone like you,
I wish nothing but the best for you,
Don't forget me, I beg,
I remember you said,
"Sometimes it lasts in love,
But sometimes it hurts instead,"

Nevermind, I'll find someone like you,
I wish nothing but the best for you, too,
Don't forget me, I beg,
I remember you said,
"Sometimes it lasts in love,
But sometimes it hurts instead,"
Sometimes it lasts in love,
But sometimes it hurts instead.

Songs Called the Blues & Blues Songs

Answer the following questions using Hughes' essay and the blues songs.

1. What are the subjects of the blues? What topics do blues writers write about?
2. What are the different types of blues?
3. How do spirituals differ from the blues?
4. Why do blues songs include humor?
5. Why does Hughes list famous Blues singers and songs in his essay? What is his point in doing this?
6. Why are the blues so popular?
7. What structural patterns do you notice in the blues songs (especially BB King's)?
8. What blues category does Etta James' song fall into? What about Adele's song? Reference the lyrics that suggest this category fits.

Hughes' Blues Poetry

Enjoy these poems as we read...

Po' Boy Blues

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I come up North de
Whole damn world's turned cold.
I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong.
Yes, I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong,
But this world is weary
An' de road is hard an' long.
I fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
Fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
She made me lose ma money
An' almost lose ma mind.
Weary, weary,
Weary early in de morn.
Weary, weary,
Early, early in de morn.
I's so weary
I wish I'd never been born.

Homesick Blues

De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
Ever time de train pass
I wants to go somewhere.
I went down to de station.
Ma heart was in ma mouth.
I went down to de station.
Ma heart was in ma mouth.
Lookin' for a box car
To roll me to de South.
Homesick blues, Lawd.
'Sa terrible thing to have.
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have.
To keep from cryin'
I opens ma mouth an laughs.

The Weary Blues

Annotate the poem as we read...remember the steps?

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.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
 O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
 Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
 O Blues!
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."
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more--
 "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."
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.

Hughes' Blues Poetry

Now that we have discussed all of the poems, complete the following questions *independently*.

1. How are "Po' Boy Blues" and "Homesick Blues" similar to the blues songs we have listened to in class?
2. What category of blues does "Po' Boy Blues" fall under? What about "Homesick Blues?"
3. How does "The Weary Blues" differ from the other blues poems/songs we have discussed?
4. Explain what is meant by the last stanza of "The Weary Blues." What could Hughes be saying about the Blues and sleeping/death?
5. What blues elements does Hughes incorporate into his poetry? List all devices you can think of that relate:
6. Which of the poems seems closest to the blues music? Why?

Madam's Past History

My name is Johnson--
Madam Alberta K.
The Madam stands for business.
I'm smart that way.

I had a
HAIR-DRESSING PARLOR
Before
The depression put
The prices lower.

Then I had a
BARBECUE STAND
Till I got mixed up
With a no-good man.

Cause I had a insurance
The WPA
Said, We can't use you
Wealthy that way.

I said,
DON'T WORRY 'BOUT ME!
Just like the song,
You WPA folks take care of yourself--
And I'll get along.

I do cooking,
Day's work, too!
Alberta K. Johnson--
Madam to you.

1. What is the WPA? How does that agency factor into the time period of the poem? What does the WPA tell her in the poem?

2. What does the last stanza mean? Considering the last line, what is the overall message of the poem?

Madam and Her Madam

I worked for a woman,
She wasn't mean—
But she had a twelve-room
House to clean.

Had to get breakfast,
Dinner, and supper, too—
Then take care of her children
When I got through.

Wash, iron, and scrub,
Walk the dog around—
It was too much,
Nearly broke me down.

I said, Madam,
Can it be
You trying to make a
Pack-horse out of me?

She opened her mouth.
She cried, Oh, no!
You know, Alberta,
I love you so!

I said, Madam,
That may be true—
But I'll be dogged
If I love you!

1. Why doesn't the speaker of the poem think the Madam is mean? What does the speaker seem to understand about her?

2. Describe the relationship of the Madam to the speaker of the poem. Are the feelings of the Madam shared by the speaker?

Madam and the Census Man

The census man,
The day he came round,
Wanted my name
To put it down.

I said, JOHNSON,
ALBERTA K.
But he hated to write
The K that way.

He said, What
Does K stand for?
I said, K--
And nothing more.

He said, I'm gonna put it
K-A-Y.
I said, If you do,
You lie.

My mother christened me
ALBERTA K.
You leave my name
Just that way!

He said, Mrs.,
(With a snort)
Just a K
Makes your name too short.

I said, I don't
Give a damn!
Leave me and my name
Just like I am!

Furthermore, rub out
That MRS., too--
I'll have you know
I'm Madam to you!

1. Why is it so important that her name just remain a simple "K" to the census man? What does this represent?

2. Why is it so important that the "Mrs." be rubbed out? What does that represent in this world? What does her refusal to go by that mean?

Madam and the Rent Man

The rent man knocked.
He said, Howdy-do?
I said, What
Can I do for you?
He said, You know
Your rent is due.

I said, Listen,
Before I'd pay
I'd go to Hades
And rot away!

The sink is broke,
The water don't run,
And you ain't done a thing
You promised to've done.

Back window's cracked,
Kitchen floor squeaks,
There's rats in the cellar,
And the attic leaks.

He said, Madam,
It's not up to me.
I'm just the agent,
Don't you see?

I said, Naturally,
You pass the buck.
If it's money you want
You're out of luck.

He said, Madam,
I ain't pleased!
I said, Neither am I.

So we agrees!

1. What does it mean when the antagonist says he is just an "agent?" Can you compare this conflict to another reading earlier in the year? How so?

2. At the end of the poem – what do the two agree upon? Is this a resolution?

The Madam Series – Bringing it all Together

Use the Madam series of poems to answer the questions below.

1. Why do you think Alberta's name is repeated so much throughout the series? What does this suggest about names in our society (Think: The Crucible).
2. What is the purpose of dialogue in these poems? What does it allow for readers to hear? What conflict does this raise between Alberta and the people she is talking to?
3. Why do you think that Alberta insists on being called Madam? How does the word choice of Madam conflict with Alberta's speech? What is the theme across the poems where this idea is repeated?
4. Who is she most likely telling off in these poems? What is one similarity in how most of these poems end? What does this suggest about her place in society? Who, or what, is she battling against?
5. What about these poems relate back to our notes on Realism?
6. What elements of Harlem Renaissance literature are in this series?
7. Describe Alberta's character.

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain

Excerpts taken from the manifesto for the Black arts movement in Harlem...

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America--this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

But let us look at the immediate background of this young poet. His family is of what I suppose one would call the Negro middle class: people who are by no means rich yet never uncomfortable nor hungry--smug, contented, respectable folk, members of the Baptist church. The father goes to work every morning. He is a chief steward at a large white club. The mother sometimes does fancy sewing or supervises parties for the rich families of the town. The children go to a mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines. And the mother often says "Don't be like niggers" when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, "Look how well a white man does things." And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of "I want to be white" runs silently through their minds. This young poet's home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.

For racial culture the home of a self-styled "high-class" Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping of things white than in a less cultured or less wealthy home. The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker, or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid. Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attend a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line. In the North they go to white theaters and white movies. And in the South they have at least two cars and house "like white folks." Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal heaven. A very high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people.

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority---may the Lord be praised! The people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him--if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

A prominent Negro clubwoman in Philadelphia paid eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller sing Andalusian popular songs. But she told me a few weeks before she would not think of going to hear "that woman," Clara Smith, a great black artist, sing Negro folksongs. And many an upper -class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services. The drab melodies in white folks' hymnbooks are much to be preferred. "We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don't believe in 'shouting.' Let's be dull like the Nordics," they say, in effect.

The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor.

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial.

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after every reading I answer questions like these from my own people: Do you think Negroes should always write about Negroes? I wish you wouldn't read some of your poems to white folks. How do you find anything interesting in a place like a cabaret? Why do you write about black people? You aren't black. What makes you do so many jazz poems?

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul--the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it, The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations--likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. She doesn't care for the Winold Reiss' portraits of Negroes because they are "too Negro." She does not want a true picture of herself from anybody. She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe that all negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be. But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro--and beautiful"?

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet," as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange unwhiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose.

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas's drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty.

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

The Negro Artist Guided Questions

Answer the questions as thoroughly as possible.

1. What is the problem Hughes outlines in the first paragraph?
2. Describe the family in paragraph two. How is hard for a poet born into such a family to be a good writer?
3. What does Hughes think is a necessity for good writing? What would his advice be to the young poet?
4. How does the diction change in paragraph four? How does this make sense given the subject matter?
5. What kinds of questions does he answer after performing his poetry? What does Hughes think of these questions? Why?
6. What metaphor does Hughes create to describe the importance of Jazz music?
7. What is the significance of the mountain metaphor?

Note on Commercial Theatre

Langston Hughes

You've taken my blues and gone -
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*
And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*
And in everything but what's about me -
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me -
Black and beautiful -
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

Note on Commercial Theatre Analysis

After reading the poem, answer the following questions.

1. What accusation was made against those who have "taken my blues and gone"?
2. Why might Hughes be wary of the blues going on Broadway? What might he be afraid of in regards to Broadway and the people there?
3. Thinking about "Songs Called the Blues" at the beginning of the packet: What should the blues be inspired by? How does Broadway conflict with this idea?
4. Explain the last 3 lines. What does he mean at the end of the poem? How does this idea connect to the end of his manifesto?
5. Using context clues, interpret the lines: "You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones* / And all kinds of *Swing Mikados* / And in everything but what's about me –" What does he mean by these lines?

Theme for English B

Langston Hughes

The instructor said,
 Go home and write
 a page tonight.
 And let that page come out of you---
 Then, it will be true.
I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York too.) Me---who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.

I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white---
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!

As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me---
although you're older---and white---
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

Questions

1. What is the poem saying about personal experiences and truth?

2. What is the poem saying about his teacher? Blacks? Whites? Americans?

“The American Dream and the American Negro”

By James Baldwin

The white South African or Mississippi sharecropper or Alabama sheriff has at bottom a system of reality which compels them really to believe when they face the Negro that this woman, this man, this child must be insane to attack the system to which he owes his entire identity. For such a person, the proposition which we are trying to discuss here does not exist.

On the other hand, I have to speak as one of the people who have been most attacked by the Western system of reality. It comes from Europe. That is how it got to America. It raises the question of whether or not civilizations can be considered equal, or whether one civilization has a right to subjugate--in fact, to destroy--another.

Now, leaving aside all the physical factors one can quote--leaving aside the rape or murder, leaving aside the bloody catalogue of oppression which we are too familiar with any way-- what the system does to the subjugated is to destroy his sense of reality. It destroys his father's authority over him. His father can no longer tell him anything because his past has disappeared.

In the case of the American Negro, from the moment you are born every stick and stone, every face, is white. Since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose you are, too. It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, and although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.

. . .

In the Deep South you are dealing with a sheriff or a landlord or a landlady or the girl at the Western Union desk. She doesn't know quite whom she is dealing with--by which I mean, if you are not part of a town and if you are a Northern nigger, it shows in millions of ways. She simply knows that it is an unknown quantity and she wants to have nothing to do with it. You have to wait a while to get your telegram. We have all been through it. By the time you get to be a man it is fairly easy to deal with. But what happens to the poor white man's, the poor white woman's, mind? It is this: they have been raised to believe, and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible some of their lives may be and no matter what disaster overtakes them, there is one consolation like a heavenly revelation--at least they are not black. I suggest that of all the terrible things that could happen to a human being that is one of the worst. I suggest that what has happened to the white Southerner is in some ways much worse than what has happened to the Negroes there.

. . .

It seems to me that the City of New York has had, for example, Negroes in it for a very long time. The City of New York was able in the last 15 years to reconstruct itself, to tear down buildings and raise great new ones, and has done nothing whatever except build housing projects, mainly in the ghettos, for the Negroes. And of course the Negroes hate it. The children can't bear it. They want to move out of the ghettos. If American pretensions were based on more honest assessments of life, it would not mean for Negroes that when someone says "urban renewal" some Negroes are going to be thrown out into the streets, which is what it means now. It is a terrible thing for an entire people to surrender to the notion that one-ninth of its population is beneath them. Until the moment comes when we, the Americans, are able to accept the fact that my ancestors are both black and white, that on that continent we are trying to forge a new identity, that we need each other, that I am not a ward of America, I am not an object of missionary charity, I am one of the people who built the country--until this moment comes there is scarcely any hope for the American dream. If the people are denied participation in it, by their very presence they will wreck it. And if that happens it is a very grave moment for the West.

James Baldwin – A Generation After Langston Hughes & the Harlem Renaissance

Please read the excerpt from Baldwin's speech, *The American Dream and the American Negro* and answer the following questions.

1. What differences do you notice between Hughes's writing and Baldwin's essay?
2. What is the essential question Baldwin asks in paragraph 2?
3. What does Baldwin mean (in paragraph 3) that "his past has disappeared?"
4. What realization does Baldwin suggest all black children make as they grow?
5. In paragraph 5, what consolation does Baldwin suggest poor whites have when their lives are difficult?

Challenge questions:

6. What does Baldwin mean when he states, "I suggest that what has happened to the white Southerner is in some ways much worse than what has happened to the Negroes there"?
7. In paragraph 6, Baldwin writes, "we need each other . . . I am one of the people who built the country – until this moment comes there is scarcely any hope for the American dream. If people are denied participation in it . . . they will wreck it"?

Your Turn: Writing Blues Poetry

Write an original blues poem that imitates the blues style of writing.

Lonesome Place

Langston Hughes

I got to leave this town.
It's a lonesome place.
Got to leave this town cause
It's a lonesome place.
A po', po' boy can't
Find a friendly face.

Goin' down to de river
Flowin' deep an' slow.
Goin' down to de river
Deep an' slow-
Cause there ain't no worries
Where de waters go.

I'm weary, weary,
Weary, as I can be.
Weary, weary,
Weary as can be.
This life's so weary,
'S' bout to overcome me.

Morning After

Langston Hughes

I was so sick last night I
Didn't hardly know my mind.
So sick last night I
Didn't know my mind.
I drunk some bad lickin' that
Almost made me blind.

Had a dream last night I
Thought I was in hell.
I drempt last night I
Thought I was in hell.
Woke up and looked around me-
Babe, your mouth was open like a well.

I said, Baby! Baby!
Please don't snore so loud.
Baby! Please!
Please don't snore so loud.
You jest a little bit o' woman but you
Sound like a great big crowd.

Directions: The preceding two poems are classic examples of blues poems. It is your task to write a blues poem following the above pattern and length. Here is some criteria for your poem:

- ✓ Your poem must address some sort of **social issue**, hardship, or injustice
- ✓ Your poem must include **repetition**
- ✓ Your poem must include Blues-style **dialect**
- ✓ Your poem may include a **refrain**

If you are having problems getting started, here is a typical blues rhyme scheme to follow:

_____ (A)
_____ (B)
_____ (variation of first line, ending in a repetition of A)
_____ (variation of second line, ending in a repetition of B)
_____ (unrhymed line)
_____ (B)

Woke up this morn' (A)
With papers to grade. (B)
Yeah, I awoke early this morn' (varied A repeat)
With five-hun'ed and fiddy papers to grade. (varied B repeat)
I said these papers just don't stop, Man-- (unrhymed)
But I gotsta' get me paid. (B)

Use the space below to draft your poem, but write your final copy on a separate sheet of paper.