

In the decades immediately following World War I, huge numbers of African Americans migrated to the industrial North from the economically depressed and agrarian South. In cities such as Chicago, Washington, DC, and New York City, the recently migrated sought and found (to some degree) new opportunities, both economic and artistic. African Americans were encouraged to celebrate their heritage and to become "The New Negro," a term coined in 1925 by sociologist and critic Alain LeRoy Locke in his influential book of the same name.

No place embodied this new aesthetic more than Harlem, home to a thriving artistic scene of literary magazines like *The Crisis* (published by the newly established NAACP), cafes, jazz clubs, and scores of reading venues. The major figures of this movement, known as the Harlem Renaissance, were enlightened by education and nourished by folk sources such as black music and the black church. More than a literary revolution or social activism, the Harlem Renaissance extolled African American culture and celebrated its singular, unique expression.

In 1922, James Weldon Johnson's anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (Harcourt, 1922), introduced a national audience to those who would become the voices of the movement: Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Other influential figures included Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Arna Bontemps, and Jean Toomer.

Langston Hughes, often referred to as the "unofficial Poet Laureate of the race," remains the central figure of the Harlem Renaissance. In his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," he proclaimed his lifelong calling: "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America." His

achievements in poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction, as well as his role as editor of several collections of African American literature, produced a body of work that endures and offers a powerful portrait of the twentieth century artist.

James Weldon Johnson was both the elder statesman and the Renaissance Man of the Harlem Renaissance: in addition to his successful literary life as a poet, novelist, and editor, he served as secretary general of the NAACP and as a consul in the U.S. Diplomatic Corps. His *God's Trombones*, a sequence of sermons, captures the generic and at the same time highly individual voice of the Negro preacher. His "Lift Every Voice And Sing" was sung every morning by generations of children in segregated schools as "The Negro National Anthem."

Countee Cullen thought long and hard in his poems about his own and collective African-American identity. Some of his strongest poems question the benevolence of a Creator who has bestowed a race with such mixed blessings. Claude McKay, born and raised in Jamaica, wrote of the immigrant's nostalgia and the American negro's pride and rage. Jean (Eugene) Toomer remains a mystery. Light enough to "pass" and alone constituting the generation's Symbolist avant-garde, he appeared briefly on the Harlem Renaissance scene, became a follower of the mystic Gurdjieff, and disappeared into the white world.

Sterling Brown, for many years a professor at Howard University, emerged in the thirties with sometimes playful, often pessimistic poems in standard English and black vernacular and in African American and European forms. In many of Brown's poems strong men and women resist the oppression of racism, poverty, and fate.

The legacy of the Harlem Renaissance opened doors and deeply influenced the generations of African American writers that followed, including Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks. In the forties, fifties, and sixties, Hayden taught at Fisk University and the University of Michigan and served two terms as the Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress. Since the publication in 1945 of her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks has combined a quiet life with critical success. Her second book, *Annie Allen*, won the 1950 Pulitzer prize, the first time a book by a black poet had won that coveted distinction, and the last time until Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, almost forty years later. Brooks was a virtuoso of technique, her exquisite poems exploring, for the first time, the interior lives of African American individuals. Brooks' perspective shifted mid-career, her later work influenced by the politically and socially radical Black Arts Movement of the sixties.

Langston Hughes

Dream Variations

To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and to dance  
Till the white day is done.  
Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes on gently,  
    Dark like me—

That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide  
In the face of the sun,  
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
Till the quick day is done.  
Rest at pale evening . . .  
A tall, slim tree . . .  
Night coming tenderly  
    Black like me.

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

I, Too, Sing America

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

## Let America Be America Again

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!  
I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today— O, Pioneers!

I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home—  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be— the land where every man is free.  
The land that's mine— the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—

America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again!

Life is Fine

I went down to the river,  
I set down on the bank.  
I tried to think but couldn't,  
So I jumped in and sank.

I came up once and hollered!  
I came up twice and cried!  
If that water hadn't a-been so cold  
I might've sunk and died.

But it was Cold in that water! It was cold!

I took the elevator  
Sixteen floors above the ground.  
I thought about my baby  
And thought I would jump down.

I stood there and I hollered!  
I stood there and I cried!  
If it hadn't a-been so high  
I might've jumped and died.

But it was High up there! It was high!

So since I'm still here livin',  
I guess I will live on.  
I could've died for love--  
But for livin' I was born

Though you may hear me holler,

And you may see me cry--  
I'll be dogged, sweet baby,  
If you gonna see me die.

Life is fine! Fine as wine! Life is fine!

### 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!

Madam and the Phone Bill

You say I O.K.ed  
LONG DISTANCE?  
O.K.ed it when?  
My goodness, Central  
That was then!

I'm mad and disgusted  
With that Negro now.  
I don't pay no REVERSED  
CHARGES nohow.

You say, I will pay it--  
Else you'll take out my phone?  
You better let  
My phone alone.

I didn't ask him  
To telephone me.  
Roscoe knows darn well  
LONG DISTANCE  
Ain't free.

If I ever catch him,  
Lawd, have pity!  
Calling me up  
From Kansas City.

Just to say he loves me!  
I knowed that was so.  
Why didn't he tell me some'n  
I don't know?

For instance, what can  
Them other girls do  
That Alberta K. Johnson  
Can't do--and more, too?

What's that, Central?  
You say you don't care  
Nothing about my  
Private affair?

Well, even less about your  
PHONE BILL, does I care!

Un-humm-m! . . . Yes!  
You say I gave my O.K.?  
Well, that O.K. you may keep--

But I *sure* ain't gonna pay!

### Night Funeral in Harlem

Night funeral  
In Harlem:

Where did they get  
Them two fine cars?

Insurance man, he did not pay--  
His insurance lapsed the other day--  
Yet they got a satin box  
for his head to lay.

Night funeral  
In Harlem:

Who was it sent  
That wreath of flowers?

Them flowers came  
from that poor boy's friends--  
They'll want flowers, too,  
When they meet their ends.

Night funeral  
in Harlem:

Who preached that  
Black boy to his grave?

Old preacher man  
Preached that boy away--  
Charged Five Dollars  
His girl friend had to pay.

Night funeral

In Harlem:

When it was all over  
And the lid shut on his head  
and the organ had done played  
and the last prayers been said  
and six pallbearers  
Carried him out for dead  
And off down Lenox Avenue  
That long black hearse done sped,  
    The street light  
    At his corner  
    Shined just like a tear--  
That boy that they was mournin'  
Was so dear, so dear  
To them folks that brought the flowers,  
To that girl who paid the preacher man--  
It was all their tears that made  
    That poor boy's  
    Funeral grand.

Night funeral  
In Harlem.

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.

### The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
    flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
    went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
    bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

## The Weary Blues

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.

Theme for English B  
by 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.

Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too?  
by Langston Hughes

Over There,  
World War II.

Dear Fellow Americans,  
I write this letter  
Hoping times will be better  
When this war  
Is through.  
I'm a Tan-skinned Yank  
Driving a tank.  
I ask, WILL V-DAY  
BE ME-DAY, TOO?

I wear a U. S. uniform.  
I've done the enemy much harm,  
I've driven back  
The Germans and the Japs,  
From Burma to the Rhine.  
On every battle line,  
I've dropped defeat  
Into the Fascists' laps.

I am a Negro American  
Out to defend my land  
Army, Navy, Air Corps--  
I am there.

I take munitions through,  
I fight--or stevedore, too.  
I face death the same as you do  
Everywhere.

I've seen my buddy lying  
Where he fell.  
I've watched him dying  
I promised him that I would try  
To make our land a land  
Where his son could be a man--  
And there'd be no Jim Crow birds  
Left in our sky.

So this is what I want to know:  
When we see Victory's glow,  
Will you still let old Jim Crow

Hold me back?  
When all those foreign folks who've waited--  
Italians, Chinese, Danes--are liberated.  
Will I still be ill-fated  
Because I'm black?

Here in my own, my native land,  
Will the Jim Crow laws still stand?  
Will Dixie lynch me still  
When I return?  
Or will you comrades in arms  
From the factories and the farms,  
Have learned what this war  
Was fought for us to learn?

When I take off my uniform,  
Will I be safe from harm--  
Or will you do me  
As the Germans did the Jews?  
When I've helped this world to save,  
Shall I still be color's slave?  
Or will Victory change  
Your antiquated views?

You can't say I didn't fight  
To smash the Fascists' might.  
You can't say I wasn't with you  
in each battle.  
As a soldier, and a friend.  
When this war comes to an end,  
Will you herd me in a Jim Crow car  
Like cattle?

Or will you stand up like a man  
At home and take your stand  
For Democracy?  
That's all I ask of you.  
When we lay the guns away  
To celebrate  
Our Victory Day  
WILL V-DAY BE ME-DAY, TOO?  
That's what I want to know.

Sincerely,  
GI Joe.

## The Bean Eaters

by Gwendolyn Brooks

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.  
Dinner is a casual affair.  
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,  
Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.  
Two who have lived their day,  
But keep on putting on their clothes  
And putting things away.

And remembering . . .  
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,  
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that  
is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths,  
tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

## The Lovers of the Poor

arrive. The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment  
League  
Arrive in the afternoon, the late light slanting  
In diluted gold bars across the boulevard brag  
Of proud, seamed faces with mercy and murder hinting  
Here, there, interrupting, all deep and debonair,  
The pink paint on the innocence of fear;  
Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall.  
Cutting with knives served by their softest care,  
Served by their love, so barbarously fair.  
Whose mothers taught: You'd better not be cruel!  
You had better not throw stones upon the wrens!  
Herein they kiss and coddle and assault  
Anew and dearly in the innocence  
With which they baffle nature. Who are full,  
Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow, all  
Sweetly abortive, hinting at fat fruit,  
Judge it high time that fiftyish fingers felt

eneath the lovelier planes of enterprise.  
To resurrect. To moisten with milky chill.  
To be a random hitching post or plush.  
To be, for wet eyes, random and handy hem.

    Their guild is giving money to the poor.  
The worthy poor. The very very worthy  
And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?  
Perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim  
Nor—passionate. In truth, what they could wish  
Is—something less than derelict or dull.  
Not staunch enough to stab, though, gaze for gaze!  
God shield them sharply from the beggar-bold!  
The noxious needy ones whose battle's bald  
Nonetheless for being voiceless, hits one down.

    But it's all so bad! and entirely too much for them.  
The stench; the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,  
Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,  
The old smoke, heavy diapers, and, they're told,  
Something called chitterlings. The darkness. Drawn  
Darkness, or dirty light. The soil that stirs.  
The soil that looks the soil of centuries.  
And for that matter the general oldness. Old  
Wood. Old marble. Old tile. Old old old.  
Note homekind Oldness! Not Lake Forest, Glencoe.  
Nothing is sturdy, nothing is majestic,  
There is no quiet drama, no rubbed glaze, no  
Unkillable infirmity of such  
A tasteful turn as lately they have left,  
Glencoe, Lake Forest, and to which their cars  
Must presently restore them. When they're done  
With dullards and distortions of this fistic  
Patience of the poor and put-upon.

    They've never seen such a make-do-ness as  
Newspaper rugs before! In this, this "flat,"  
Their hostess is gathering up the oozed, the rich  
Rugs of the morning (tattered! the bespattered . . .),  
Readies to spread clean rugs for afternoon.  
Here is a scene for you. The Ladies look,  
In horror, behind a substantial citizeness  
Whose trains clank out across her swollen heart.  
Who, arms akimbo, almost fills a door.  
All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor  
And tortured thereover, potato peelings, soft-  
Eyed kitten, hunched-up, haggard, to-be-hurt.

    Their League is allotting largesse to the Lost.

But to put their clean, their pretty money, to put  
Their money collected from delicate rose-fingers

Tipped with their hundred flawless rose-nails seems . . .

They own Spode, Lowestoft, candelabra,  
Mantels, and hostess gowns, and sunburst clocks,  
Turtle soup, Chippendale, red satin "hangings,"  
Aubussons and Hattie Carnegie. They Winter  
In Palm Beach; cross the Water in June; attend,  
When suitable, the nice Art Institute;  
Buy the right books in the best bindings; saunter  
On Michigan, Easter mornings, in sun or wind.  
Oh Squalor! This sick four-story hulk, this fibre  
With fissures everywhere! Why, what are bringings  
Of loathe-love largesse? What shall peril hungers  
So old old, what shall flatter the desolate?  
Tin can, blocked fire escape and chitterling  
And swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage  
Of the middle passage, and urine and stale shames  
And, again, the porridges of the underslung  
And children children children. Heavens! That  
Was a rat, surely, off there, in the shadows? Long  
And long-tailed? Gray? The Ladies from the Ladies!  
Betterment League agree it will be better  
To achieve the outer air that rights and steadies,  
To hie to a house that does not holler, to ring  
Bells elsetime, better presently to cater  
To no more Possibilities, to get  
Away. Perhaps the money can be posted.  
Perhaps they two may choose another Slum!  
Some serious sooty half-unhappy home!—  
Where loathe-lover likelier may be invested.

Keeping their scented bodies in the center  
Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,  
They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall,  
Are off at what they manage of a canter,  
And, resuming all the clues of what they were,  
Try to avoid inhaling the laden air.

## The Mother

Abortions will not let you forget.  
You remember the children you got that you did not get,  
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,  
The singers and workers that never handled the air.  
You will never neglect or beat  
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.  
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb  
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.  
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,  
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children.  
I have contracted. I have eased  
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.  
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized  
Your luck  
And your lives from your unfinished reach,  
If I stole your births and your names,  
Your straight baby tears and your games,  
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your deaths,  
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.  
Though why should I whine,  
Whine that the crime was other than mine?<sup>2</sup>—  
Since anyhow you are dead.  
Or rather, or instead,  
You were never made.  
But that too, I am afraid,  
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?  
You were born, you had body, you died.  
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you  
All.

the sonnet-ballad

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?  
They took my lover's tallness off to war,  
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess  
What I can use an empty heart-cup for.

He won't be coming back here any more.  
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew  
When he went walking grandly out that door  
That my sweet love would have to be untrue.

Would have to be untrue. Would have to court  
Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange  
Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)  
Can make a hard man hesitate—and change.

And he will be the one to stammer, "Yes."  
Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?

THE POOL PLAYERS.

SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

## Poetic Form: Blues Poem

One of the most popular forms of American poetry, the blues poem stems from the African American oral tradition and the musical tradition of the blues. A blues poem typically takes on themes such as struggle, despair, and sex. It often (but not necessarily) follows a form, in which a statement is made in the first line, a variation is given in the second line, and an ironic alternative is declared in the third line.

African-American writer Ralph Ellison said that although the blues are often about struggle and depression, they are also full of determination to overcome difficulty "through sheer toughness of spirit." This resilience in the face of hardship is one of the hallmarks of the blues poem.

Some of the great blues poets include Sterling A. Brown, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes. The title poem of Hughes' first book, *The Weary Blues*, is also an excellent example of a blues poem. It begins:

"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 . . . "

Another example is Brown's poem "Riverbank Blues," which begins:

"A man git his feet set in a sticky mudbank,  
A man git dis yellow water in his blood,  
No need for hopin', no need for doin',  
Muddy streams keep him fixed for good."

Contemporary poet Kevin Young is continuing the tradition; his most recent book, *Jelly Roll*, is a collection that draws heavily on the blues tradition. Young is the editor of the recent anthology, *Blues Poems*.

Groundbreaking Book: *The Weary Blues* by Langston Hughes (1926)

Langston Hughes was born in Missouri and raised in Kansas and Illinois. Before publishing his first book, *The Weary Blues*, he lived in Mexico, New York, and traveled through Africa and Europe by working a variety of odd jobs. He died in his beloved Harlem in 1967, a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance and author of numerous plays, poems, and novels.

Hughes was just 24 years old when *The Weary Blues* was published in 1926. The poems progress at a self-assured and lyrical pace—partly because Hughes expected them to be performed with musical accompaniment in the famous Harlem clubs of that era. After its publication, the book won several awards, and the prize money allowed Hughes to complete his college education in Lincoln, Pennsylvania.

In *The Weary Blues*, Hughes began to address the preoccupations that carried through his later work. He announced his poetic philosophy of speaking not only for himself, but also the whole

African American population. The book is split into seven thematic sections: The Weary Blues, Dream Variations, The Negro Speaks of Rivers, A Black Pierrot, Water Front Streets, Shadows in the Sun, and Our Land.

Hughes experimented with forms and the gray area between narrative and lyric in this volume. Three of the most widely anthologized poems from this first book include "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Dream Variation," "Mother to Son," and the title poem, in which Hughes inhabits various voices, adding to the collection's cast of characters. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," dedicated to W. E. B. DuBois, Hughes addresses the depth and strength of the black soul; "Mother to Son," on the other hand, offers a mother's descriptive words to her son regarding the difficulty of life and her own endurance; while the title poem uses musical rhythms to describe the fatigue of an aging blues singer.

Hughes listed his influences as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg, and Walt Whitman. In the tradition of those great American poets who were interested in the daily rhythms of the public and of work, Hughes in turn has influenced generations of writers of all races. His poems still reverberate with a clarity of emotion and capture the commotion of life in tandem with the anticipation of rest, as when he writes in the poem "Dream Variation," "Dance! whirl! whirl! / Till the quick day is done."

## A Brief Guide to Jazz Poetry

Jazz poetry is a literary genre defined as poetry necessarily informed by jazz music—that is, poetry in which the poet responds to and writes about jazz. Jazz poetry, like the music itself, encompasses a variety of forms, rhythms, and sounds. Beginning with the birth of blues and jazz at the beginning of the twentieth century, jazz poetry is can be seen as a thread that runs through the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat movement, and the Black Arts Movement—and it is still vibrant today. From early blues to free jazz to experimental music, jazz poets use their appreciation for the music as poetic inspiration.

Not only the music but the artists make frequent appearances in jazz poetry: Louis Armstrong, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, Bessie Smith, and Lester Young are just some of the muses for jazz poetry.

But writing about jazz poetry is, as they say, like dancing about architecture. Perhaps the form can be best understood through a few lines from the poets themselves:

from *The Weary Blues*, by Langston Hughes:

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.

from *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, by Jayne Cortez:

I crisscrossed with Monk

Wailed with Bud

Counted every star with Stitt

Sang "Don't Blame Me" with Sarah

Wore a flower like Billie

Screamed in the range of Dinah

& scatted "How High the Moon" with Ella Fitzgerald

as she blew roof off the Shrine Auditorium

Jazz at the Philharmonic

Poets in the Jazz tradition include: Amiri Baraka, Marvin Bell, Sterling Brown, Hayden Carruth, Jayne Cortez, Michael S. Harper, Langston Hughes, Jack Kerouac, Yusef Komunyakaa, Mina Loy, Kenneth Rexroth, and Sonia Sanchez.

For further reading, consult these anthologies: *Jazz Poetry Anthology*, Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, eds. (Indiana University Press, 1991); *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, Vol. 2, Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, eds. (Indiana University Press, 1996); and *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present*, Sascha Feinstein (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997).

JAMIn April 2002, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History launched Jazz Appreciation Month (JAM) to draw greater public attention to the extraordinary heritage and history of jazz and its importance as an American cultural heritage. Every April, the Smithsonian produces a Jazz Poetry event as part of JAM and National Poetry Month.